Testing Textbooks: The Case for Italian Opera

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"[Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi] possessed dramatic verve to a great degree, aimed straight for the mark, and when at their best always hit the operatic target right in the bull's-eye."

Gustav Kobbe, How to Appreciate Music (1906)

Although Kobbe's summary of the Italian opera tradition might sound merely quaint to many readers, students of Italian opera might sense some sinister undertones. In this context, for example, "dramatic verve" could appear suspicious, standing as it does in opposition to a host of more respectable phrases ("artistic integrity" and "musical sincerity" come to mind). And even though Kobbe praises, he does so faintly: these composers possessed dramatic verve (only) to "a great degree," and his archery metaphor is strikingly, maybe intentionally, vague -- how many times, a curious reader might wonder, did Rossini, et al. miss the bull's-eye? Or the entire "operatic target" for that matter?

My defensive reaction to Kobbe, which undoubtedly overstates the case, reflects a vigilance on the part of Italian opera scholars to root out unflattering presuppositions that have plagued the bel canto repertory. Today, of course, this genre stands somewhere near the center of musicological research, but as is the case for any repertory that was once considered peripheral, music textbooks sometimes lag behind the times in their discussions of the music. As Fabrizio Della Seta has written, the negative assumptions that once surrounded the study of nineteenth-century Italian opera have "affected the best musicological historiography of the past, from Hermann Abert to Alfred Einstein, from Edward J. Dent to Donald J. Grout," and perhaps far more troubling, he stresses, these presuppositions continue to find currency in general histories of the present.

The purpose of this review essay is to evaluate the treatment that nineteenth-century Italian opera has received in textbooks from the past fifty years. My motivation for undertaking this project is straightforward: the past two years have witnessed the publication of two new textbooks, Jon Finson's Nineteenth-Century Music: The Western Classical Tradition (Prentice Hall, 2002) and Mark Evan Bonds's A History of Music in Western Culture (Prentice Hall, 2003). The potential audiences for these books are large, running the gamut from musical dilettantes to graduate students specializing in nineteenth-century music; for this reason alone, it is important to assess their accuracy where Italian opera is concerned. Rather than simply reviewing how these individual authors write about the genre, however (something I will do, but only toward the conclusion of this essay), I have decided on a more circuitous route, revisiting a group of older texts and surveys to sketch out the background against which to situate the new. Among the questions that shape this investigation are: How and why have textbook discussions of Italian opera been transformed over the past fifty years as the subject has grown more popular among musicologists and scholars from other disciplines? Is there a clear and consistent distinction in the treatment of nineteenth-century Italian opera composers, or do texts and surveys construct a hierarchy along which they place Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and others? Finally, are defensive stances such as the one I demonstrated at the opening of this essay warranted or are they themselves passe?

The first part of this essay addresses texts that focus on nineteenth-century Western art music (Alfred Einstein's Music in the Romantic Era [Norton, 1947], Edward J. Dent's The Rise of Romantic Opera [Cambridge, 1976], Leon Plantinga's Romantic Music [Norton, 1984], and Carl Dahlhaus's Nineteenth-Century Music [University of California, 1991]), and a handful of widely circulated general surveys (K. Marie Stolba's The Development of Western Music [3rd edition, McGraw Hill, 1998], Joseph Kerman's Listen [4th brief edition, St. Martin's, 2000], Craig Wright's Listening to Music [3rd edition, Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000], Donald J. Grout's A History of Western Music [6th edition, Norton, 2001]). Of course, many books remain unaccounted for, but in selecting this group my intention was to investigate a representative sample of the best and most popular musicological historiography that encompasses as wide a chronological swath of the past fifty years as possible. Together, these texts allow the critic to tease out various means of discussing Verdi's triumphs, Donizetti's troubles, Bellini's potential, and much more -- themes that resonate in textbook writing to the present day. The last portion of this essay will review Jon Finson's and Mark Evan Bonds's books against the backdrop of this survey.
Verdi the Savior

When I initiated this project, I expected to find clear distinctions between authors' attitudes to German composers and to their Italian contemporaries, particularly in older books such as Einstein's and Dent's. I assumed that their approaches would reveal an obvious contrast whereby German composers would represent objects of unequivocal praise, and Italian musicians would be acknowledged only grudgingly. In reality, this preconception obscures a more complex situation in which only some components of the nineteenth-century Italian-opera repertory fall prey to accusations of aesthetic immorality. When textbook authors impose binary oppositions on opera composers, they usually do so for distinctions that they perceive within the Italian repertory. Thus, the opposition between Verdi and his predecessors is more intense than any comparison between Verdi and Wagner. The negative outcomes of this situation, particularly with regard to Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini, are numerous and will be discussed in the following pages. However, it is with a positive factor that I would like to start: beginning with Alfred Einstein's Music in the Romantic Era, and continuing through the books reviewed at the conclusion of this essay, Verdi is treated consistently as Wagner's equal; this perception almost always translates into careful consideration and analysis of his biography and music. Einstein sets the tone in his text, and although there is much in his discussion with which one might take issue, there is far more to praise.

Einstein's survey of Verdi's music is as thorough as one could wish for in a book that attempts to explore the whole of the nineteenth century in one volume. In his chapter on Verdi, which he divides by means of Verdi's three "compositional periods," he takes into account nearly every opera. Although he mentions some only in passing, or to make a general point about the composer's dramatic or musical aesthetic, he pauses over others, such as Nabucco, Macbeth, and Les Vêpres siciliennes, operas that receive little or no attention in later texts and surveys. His analyses tend to be synoptic (no examples appear anywhere in the book), but his characterizations of Verdi's compositional style and his comments on affect of individual numbers are as sensitive as they are thought-provoking. What he writes about the recitative throughout Macbeth offers a good illustration: "the voice hovers alone in space, and in the pauses an echo of a woeful cry seems to become audible. Here the recitative is less than usual a mere 'preparation' for the closed numbers" (278).

Not everything that Einstein writes reflects favorably on Verdi's operas: he argues, for example, that much of the music in Les Vêpres siciliennes is "feeble" and that the characters themselves are "historical puppets" (a fault he attributes more to Scribe than to Verdi); and he assesses all of La traviata as "weak" owing to its "disgusting sentimentality" and its "excessive simplicity of melody." Some of his statements, moreover, are even more puzzling: he uses the term "folk," for instance, to describe the Rigoletto, Trovatore, Traviata trilogy — a word he earlier applied quite disparagingly to describe Donizetti's entire oeuvre. Nevertheless, one emerges from a reading of Einstein's commentary with the impression that, out of deep regard for Verdi's music, he attempts to present a fair and balanced account of what he perceives to be the most salient aspects of the composer's oeuvre. Nowhere does this sense emerge more clearly than in the comparisons Einstein draws between Verdi and Wagner.

When contrasting these two "antagonists" (as he labels them), Einstein refers to the "melodist" vs. "symphonist" binary, which historically has served to stand in for a host of biases. There are moments when Einstein does reveal a favoritism toward German music, but when he applies this distinction to Verdi and Wagner, he does so not to denigrate the former and elevate the latter, but simply to indicate differences in compositional style. There are even moments when Einstein appears to favor Verdi over Wagner, as in this statement following his exploration of Il trovatore: "Verdi disdains all the ingenuities of the leitmotiv, being an operatic rather than a symphonic composer; he uses repetition only in the striking manner of opera" (277). Here one discerns a slight jibe in Wagner's direction, as Einstein seems to be suggesting that less is more — that Verdi's select musical reminiscences infuse his operas with greater dramatic verve than Wagner's leitmotivic webs bring to his operas. Indeed, each time Einstein sets Verdi and Wagner in opposition to one another, Verdi emerges as respectfully, and sometimes more so, than his counterpart.

As a Jewish émigré, Einstein has a less than wholehearted love for Wagner, which is not surprising. Nevertheless, he does not stand alone in his praise for Verdi. The earliest edition of Joseph Kerman's Listen (1972, written in cooperation with Vivian Kerman) offers a special example: Listen represents the first successful attempt by a musicologist to organize a textbook, geared primarily to undergraduate students, entirely around analyses of musical works, keeping biographical and historical detail to a minimum. To this end, very little of Verdi's oeuvre is mentioned, nor does the student read much more than the bare essentials about the composer's position in history. Instead, Kerman provides one of the most detailed and eloquent musical analyses found in any textbook before or since. The music he examines comes from Aida — the Judgment and Tomb Scenes — and he approaches the music from the bottom up, describing each scene measure-by-measure rather than taking account of large-scale structure. Although this narrative has a rather formless appearance, Kerman brings Verdi's music to life by skillfully describing each significant event as it occurs in the score. He deftly traces the appearance of musical figures with which the priests are associated, for example, beginning with the "sinister-sounding motive" that accompanies their entrance, up through the "coarse, marchlike tune, punctuated by harsh rhythmic explosions in the orchestra" with which they con-
demn Radames to death. This music, Kerman tells us, exposes these men as "vengeful" and cruel spirits, rather than as dignified ecclesiastics. His description succeeds because, as was the case with Einstein's summary, Kerman reveals a deep engagement with Verdi's aesthetic and musical achievements, plainly demonstrating that, as Carl Dahlhaus has stated, "the actual drama, even of the Italian variety, is not to be found in the turbulence of the plot," but rather in the music itself (Nineteenth-Century Music, 207).

Most authors since have adopted a combination of Einstein's and Kerman's approaches toward Verdi's music, incorporating a host of biographical/historical details as well as musical analyses into their discussions. The amount of music considered and the excerpts analyzed differ according to author and agenda: Dahlhaus, for example, discusses passages from Luisa Miller, Rigoletto, and Otello to gauge how Verdi confronted formal conventions such as the bipartite aria, the recitative, and the "contemplative ensemble;" Plantinga draws his examples from Nabucco, Ernani, Rigoletto, Aida, and Otello to trace the composer's stylistic advances throughout his career. Despite this variety, one element remains constant: Verdi's music is held up as representing one of the pinnacles of Western art music production; alongside Schubert and Schumann, Brahms and Wagner, Verdi emerges as one of the composers about whom students must learn.

While in one sense this situation is comforting, it also has some drawbacks. The most troubling is that the sheer amount of attention lavished on Verdi leaves the impression that this composer "saved" Italian opera, rising triumphantly above his predecessors and the chains of convention, victoriously redeeming (in the Wagnerian sense of the term) the genre from a dark past and decadent present. Einstein again sets the tone, comparing Verdi's achievements with his predecessors' "failures": "[Verdi] wished to base his art, his music, on no other presuppositions than truth to his feeling and the directness or fidelity of the melodic expression. And that is precisely the feature that differentiates him from his predecessors, Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Mercadante, and all the rest" (272). A vital component of this argument is the conviction, especially among the older texts, that a teleological evolution dictated the progress of Verdi's music. Besides selling short many of Verdi's earlier operas, this formulation also perpetuates a preconception about his predecessors' music. When Einstein writes, for example, "...it is due to Verdi's seriousness and to what one might call his dramatic morality that all routine and convention in the course of his development became less and less perceptible" (173-174), his reader is unhappily forced to conclude that any composer who worked consistently within the conventions of this time lacked "dramatic morality." The negative implications for Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini are clear.

In Nineteenth-Century Music, Dahlhaus balks at this notion of teleological development, commenting, "It has long been a commonplace among music historians to view Verdi as progressing gradually from an opera composer, joining musical numbers on the principle of contrast and climax, to a 'genuine' dramatist guided in his late works by the ideal of musicotheatrical 'continuity.' Yet this view, valid as it may be as a rough approximation, falls short as an aesthetic formula" (207). Unfortunately, even though Dahlhaus identifies this paradigm as problematic, when he considers Verdi's oeuvre against the achievements of his predecessors, he does not always display similar reservations. The contradiction emerges in his description of the Act IV quartet from Rigoletto. Here, Dahlhaus offers as the primary accomplishment of this number (and few could disagree with him) Verdi's masterful juxtaposition of four distinct musical lines, each of which captures the individual emotions of the Duke, Gilda, Rigoletto, and Maddalena. But his discussion becomes problematic when he states, "the listener, rather than giving way entirely to the music of the moment, must constantly bear in mind the overall nexus of emotions with their tragic entanglements" (emphasis mine, 214). This quartet, in other words, represents high art; the listener must be fully engaged to comprehend; it is the opposite of background music, of entertainment. Were this comment to appear on its own, it would cause little objection since a similar description could be attached to any number of ensembles composed by Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini. However, Dahlhaus's remark follows closely his assertion that Verdi was the first composer of Italian opera to infuse individual characteristics into the melodic lines of ensembles. The implicit distinction eliminates Verdi's predecessors from the realm of great art, leaving them only as entertainers.

What is objectionable in this formulation is not the idea that Verdi learned from his predecessors and that as a result, some of his musico-dramatic achievements surpass much of what came before him. Rather, what is problematic is that this notion of progress encourages some textbook authors to ignore Rossini's, Bellini's, and Donizetti's accomplishments, suggesting instead that Verdi's inspiration sprang from a vacuum rather than from a longstanding operatic tradition (an example of this misconception emerges in Bond's chapter on Italian opera, discussed below). Equally troubling, moreover, are those authors who incorporate the notion of Verdi as "savior" into their discussions of Donizetti and Bellini, for often their summaries misrepresent the music and the composers themselves.

Before moving to that discussion, though, it is important to mention one other misleading ramification of Verdi as the "savior" of the Italian operatic tradition: one of Verdi's "triumphs" was to single-handedly transform Italian opera from a collaborative to a composer-driven endeavor. This assumption helps authors avoid exploration of the openness of the operatic text, since one of the problems from which Verdi supposedly "rescued" the genre was the med-
ling of the opera singer, the impresario, and so on. The avoidance of what opera scholars now understand to be one of the most vibrant aspects of Italian-opera production is abetted by textbook authors' tendency to evade discussion of operas written before Macbeth; that is, before Verdi began to insist on strict adherence to his scores. But even when authors engage with operas written earlier (and this goes also for works by Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini), little attempt is made to acknowledge contributions by anyone other than the composer and, on occasion, the librettist.

There are admittedly sincere efforts to move beyond the composer-centric manner of describing the genre. Craig Wright, for example, mentions the nineteenth-century "cult of the diva" in which the prima donna "held the most exalted position in the musical firmament" (279), and K. Marie Stolba identifies singers who premiered important roles such as Norma and Semiramis. In neither case, however, do the authors develop these isolated pieces of data or connect them to the music. Without a doubt, space is an issue, but in reality the openness of operatic texts would take little more than a sentence or two to explore. In only two sentences, after all, Arnold Whittall concludes his chapter on Italian opera highlighting what he sees as a negative: "Recent research – Budden, Rosselli – has emphasized the realities of a world in which composers had to compete for contracts in an utterly commercial market ... Such a situation is hardly conducive to the creation of profound or sophisticated art, or to the contemplation of those qualities of structure and expression likely to lead to great Romantic art." It is easy to imagine these phrases altered only slightly to stress the positive ramifications of this opera industry: for example, "Such a situation encouraged creative contributions by all parties involved, not just the composer," illustrating that these circumstances were indeed responsible for much "profound" art.

**Donizetti as Fall Guy / Bellini as Lost Potential**

The composer who suffers most severely at the hands of textbook authors is Gaetano Donizetti. Unfortunately Einstein, whose opinions are mimicked by many newer texts, had little appreciation for the genre beyond Verdi's music. His discussion of Donizetti is particularly disheartening, consisting of only two scathing paragraphs that contain this insensitive summary: "Between 1818 and 1844 (when attacks of insanity put an end to his creative work), he had written more than sixty operas. He was a careless worker, without particular ambition, often driven to write by need. Only during a brief period of competition with Bellini did his artistic ambition feel any very strong incitement" (268). Although Einstein appreciates some of Donizetti's output (he praises Lucia di Lammermoor, for instance, and characterizes Don Pasquale as a masterpiece), he ascribes most of his aesthetic success to "accident," since "Donizetti worked so quickly that it was almost pure chance whether a work of his became a success or a fiasco" (268). Of course, the notion that rapid composition automatically resulted in works of lesser aesthetic value has long been recognized for its absurdity, and yet this negative preconception clings to Donizetti's music. The following comment, for example, appeared in every edition of Grout's *A History of Western Music* up through and including the fifth edition (published in 1996): "The rough, primitive, impulsive character of his music is well suited to his crude, melodramatic situations, but his works – composed for the most part very rapidly and with a view to immediate success – are often monotonously uniform in harmony, rhythm, and orchestration ..." (632). Only in the most recent edition of this text (published in 2001) does this comment disappear.

On those occasions when authors view Donizetti positively, they tend to focus not on his achievements, but rather on those aspects of his compositional style that fore-shadow Verdi. Grout, for example, describes him thus, "As a composer of serious opera Donizetti was Verdi's immediate forerunner. He constantly moved the drama forward, averting cadences that would entice applause until a major scene was finished" (6th edition, 608). Donizetti was at his best, in other words, when he wrote "continuous" music, a damaging assumption that reveals a strong bias toward Wagnerian structure and which serves to justify the exclusion of large chunks of Donizetti's output. Dahlhaus states the case against such sentiments most articulately when he writes, "It would be wrong to measure the historical development of Italian opera against the yardstick of Wagner's music drama and its prototypes and to praise unstintingly the disappearance of the boundary between recitative and aria as 'progress' in the direction of 'endless melody'" (123).

This reliance on generalizations and misconceptions impacts negatively on authors' attempts to discuss Donizetti's music. In his summary of Donizetti's oeuvre, for example, Plantinga writes that his arias are "often stereotypes and musically less satisfying ... Donizetti's melodies themselves, whatever their dramatic surroundings, often sound much the same" (140). And yet, Plantinga's musical example – Percy's "Nel veder la tua costanza," a cabaletta in moderato tempo from *Anna Bolena* – demonstrates that he lacks broad understanding of Donizetti's music. He characterizes this unhurried melody, for instance, as "robust" and "swinging," missing its affect, and cites its "absolute regularity of periodization," even though the passage he prints consists of a four-bar antecedent followed by a six-bar consequent (139-140).

Bellini fares only slightly better than Donizetti in older texts. Einstein characterizes him as "no great thinker or philosopher so far as the purpose and aims of opera were concerned" (265), and Dent initiates his discussion with this snide comment: "The weakness of Bellini, especially in these early operas, is that he seems to have no sense of general dignity and style" (165). Yet the picture these texts
paint of Bellini is more encouraging than their descriptions of Donizetti: to Dent and Einstein, Bellini’s operas represent lost potential, the products of an artist limited by the conventions of his day and by the tragic brevity of his life. This impression emerges in the ambivalence with which they describe his music (‘at one moment he will write melodies that are deeply moving, and on the next page we shall find trivial vulgarities which modern musicians find either disgusting or ridiculous’ [Dent, 165]), and in the generalizations they make about his entire oeuvre (‘In the ten operas which were crowded together within the ten years of his work, however, he displayed notable progress in knowledge and inner growth’ [Einstein, 265]).

Moreover, one finds these authors trying to “protect” Bellini from critics of the past, maintaining, for instance, that, “the circle about Wagner and Liszt was not very well fitted to deal justly with Italian opera” (Einstein, 265) – one would be hard pressed to find a similar argument made on Donizetti’s behalf. As is the case with Donizetti, seldom in these two books is Bellini’s music given its due (although Einstein lavishes praise on Norma; see 267-268).

Throughout their accounts, both authors reveal a clear preference for Bellini’s operas over Donizetti’s.

Few authors are as outspoken as Einstein and Dent in their partiality for Bellini, but the preconception lingers in later texts, emerging often in subtle gestures. Plantinga’s extended comparison of Bellini’s and Donizetti’s music is typical:

Donizetti’s recitative shows more variety and flexibility than Bellini’s, and there is proportionately more of it, since Bellini breaks more readily into arioso style. Bellini’s arias are much more variable than those of Donizetti – whose tunes are often uniformly rousing and rhythmic – and they frequently seem more congruent with the dramatic situation at hand. And that sinuous, decorated melody of Bellini’s most expressive manner, widely imitated in subsequent vocal and instrumental music, came to figure prominently in the future of Romantic musical style (142-143).

This comparison is not entirely skewed. The distinctions Plantinga draws are too categorical, however, obscuring the important point that there are examples of Bellini’s recitative that are every bit as dramatically effective as Donizetti’s, and that many of Donizetti’s arias conform with subtlety to the affect of their surrounding narratives. Indeed, such comparisons are pervasive, a circumstance that Dahlhaus comments on in his own text: “It is misleading or at least awry to view Bellini, despite what he once called his ‘melancholy muse,’ lopsidedly as noble and elegiac as opposed to the hyperemotional and grandstanding Donizetti. Bellini was in no way averse to outbursts of agitation, and Donizetti was thoroughly capable of striking a note of melancholy” (122). Though their terms of comparison are distinct, Plantinga’s assertion and Dahlhaus’s warning mark out identical territory: time and again scholars construe Bellini and Donizetti in terms of absolutes from which Bellini’s music emerges as the more aesthetically weighty, harking – as Plantinga would have it – toward the “future of Romantic musical style.” Why does Bellini’s music receive such precedence? Is there something external to the operas that drives these assessments?

To confront these questions, one need look no farther than to the preconceptions that have plagued these and other composers of nineteenth-century Italian opera almost from the origins of the genre. Donizetti violated one of the primary requirements of a “true” artist by writing “too fast,” and worse, he did so for financial interests. Even though Bellini was notoriously insecure about his sluggishness, and even though his professional ambitions focused on worldly concerns as much as did Donizetti’s, his relatively low output has served, ironically, to place him on higher footing than his competitor. Moreover, we cannot ignore Wagner’s influence. Even though only Einstein makes direct reference to Wagner’s well-known appreciation for Bellini’s musical style – his enthusiastic response to Bellini in his youth – the Meister’s opinions resonate implicitly throughout many texts. To Wagner, Bellini’s music revealed the potential for truly great musical artworks, whereas Donizetti’s works merited little attention. Unfortunately, this perception has not changed for many textbook authors since Wagner’s day.

Rossini’s Romanticism

Many textbooks initiate their discussions of Italian opera with a routine disclaimer: “Italy was less susceptible than northern countries to the seduction of the Romantic movement, and her composers were therefore less quickly tempted to try new and radical experiments. Romantic elements permeated Italian opera only gradually, and never to the same degree as in Germany and France” (Grout, A History of Western Music, 1st edition, 550). This assumption affects the way authors evaluate nineteenth-century Italian opera, from Il barbiere di Siviglia through Verdi’s Otello, and it resonates with particular force in appraisals of Rossini, perhaps because chronology demands that consideration of the genre begin with his music. I would like to explore how authors weave this notion of Romanticism into their summaries of Italian opera, focusing primarily on the case of Rossini.

The maneuver of distinguishing Italian opera from other genres through the lens of Romanticism began with the earliest texts and surveys. The way Dent initiates his discussion of Rossini is typical: “Romanticism, generally speaking, was entirely foreign to Rossini’s whole temperament, and to his conception of opera” (115). Both Dent and Einstein provide explanations for this circumstance, Einstein’s representing the more idiosyncratic: “The Romantic movement was in great part a yearning for the warmth, naturalness, colorfulness, and freedom of the

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Alongside these familiar attributes, Dent and Einstein also comment. That is one reason why we are justified in calling in addition to the humorous—it is the combination of these comedic character of him a quintet from displaying a heavy dose of the crueler side of human nature means. Dent, for example, writes that Rossini, draws attention to features of Rossini's music that supersede fields (albeit vaguely) in musical numbers such as the Act II Romantic, the composer to his traditional textbook definitions of what Romanticism!ago, serves today to define and recognizes in French and German repertories and that still among the features they describe are ones that textbooks provincial, Neapolitan or Venetian; Rossini made it Italian "Before seems contradictory, immediately after characterizing particular (if not peculiar) Romantic qualities. Although it contrary, they both incorporated Rossini into their studies specifically because they understood his music to display particular (if not peculiar) Romantic qualities. Although it seems contradictory, immediately after characterizing Rossini as an ‘anti-Romantic,’ both Einstein and Dent catalog a host of attributes that classify him as Romantic. Among the features they describe are ones that textbooks continue to cite to the present day as defining elements of the Romantic movement, such as the overt presence of nationalistic spirit. When Dent writes, for example, that, "Before Rossini, Italian music had always been local and provincial, Neapolitan or Venetian; Rossini made it Italian and universal" (116), he is appealing to a theme that he recognizes in French and German repertoires and that still serves today to define "Romanticism" in general. Similarly, both authors identify Rossini's choice of subject matter as emerging from a universal Romantic aesthetic: La donna del lago, "which being taken from Sir Walter Scott was in itself Romantic," and Shakespeare's Othello both served to inspire the composer to his "greatest heights" (Dent, 115). Alongside these familiar attributes, Dent and Einstein also draw attention to features of Rossini's music that supersede traditional textbook definitions of what Romanticism means. Dent, for example, writes that Rossini, "makes no attempt to distinguish between the serious style and the comic. That is one reason why we are justified in calling him a Romantic" (117). And Einstein explores the "secretly demonic character of Rossini's music," which he identifies (albeit vaguely) in musical numbers such as the Act II quintet from Il barbiere di Siviglia and Basilio's 'slander aria.' Neither piece, the author explains, is entirely comic, each displaying a heavy dose of the crueler side of human nature in addition to the humorous—it is the combination of these two elements, Einstein argues, that exposes the composer as a Romantic. These assessments of Rossini's music are informative not only because they draw firm links between this repertory and that of Rossini's contemporaries, but also because they emphasize traits unique to his style. In other words, both authors demonstrate an important willingness to look beyond stereotyped definitions of Romanticism, and while this approach runs the risk of stretching the term so wide as to render it meaningless, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. Dent's and Einstein's conclusions are not always convincing, but they are at the very least thought-provoking.

In later textbooks and surveys, especially those geared to the non-major undergraduate such as Kerman's Listen and Wright's Listening to Music, this all-embracing approach to describing Romanticism disappears, replaced by something more methodical: chapters, headed by titles such as "The Romantic Spirit," list and define a handful of the movement's most distinctive philosophical traits ("a fascination for nature," "reverence for the past," "the supernatural," and the "Individual/ Hero") and of the most distinctive musical traits (melody, rhythm, and tone color). Initiating discussions of nineteenth-century music with this sort of tally, derived as it is from German Romanticism and the German repertory, has the unfortunate effect of isolating and implicitly marginalizing Italian opera. Most authors are sensitive to this problem and design their discussions of Rossini's music accordingly. Grout, for example, draws connections between Rossini's style and that of the German Romantics, writing that, "he shares with other nineteenth-century composers a fondness for bringing mediant keys into close juxtaposition with the tonic" (6th edition, 605). Even given this attention, however, these texts evoke Dahlhaus's famous concept of "twins styles"—which often reinforces, rather than breaks down, hierarchical notions of Rossini's position in relation to his German contemporaries. Until authors develop alternative methods of prefacing their chapters on nineteenth-century music, until they stop beginning their discussions with Beethoven and then turning to Rossini, commenting that it is "hard to believe" that the latter was once more popular than the former, this circumstance will continue to plague textbooks.

**Puccini's Absence**

While Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti may be maligned, Puccini is made invisible in too many textbooks. Among the chief offenders, predictably, is Joseph Kerman's Listen, and a glance at all seven editions of this text demonstrates the extent of the problem. In the first three (1972, 1976, 1980) Kerman ignores Puccini's operas, mentioning them only in a section marked "alternative selections." There he writes, "If an excerpt from Puccini is wanted, the ending of Act II of Tosca, including the offstage torture of
Cavaradossi, the "Vissi d'arte," and the murder of Scarpia, can be recommended" (279). That he suggests music from this "shabby little shocker" is surprising; that there is a whiff of grudging disdain as he does so is not.¹³

In Listen's fourth edition (the first brief edition, 1987), however, Kerman opens up his discussion of Romantic opera to Puccini, incorporating remarks pertaining to the "realistic tendencies" exploited by late-nineteenth-century composers, and including a discussion of "Un bel di" from Madama Butterfly. This analysis is briefer than those for Verdi's and Wagner's music, but it elucidates Puccini's music superbly. His exploration of the aria remains in the next edition (1992), but unhappily, it disappears from the latest two versions (1996, 2000, the last written in cooperation with Gary Tomlinson), leaving behind only a few remarks about the composer.

There is no practical explanation for Puccini's disappearance — although the preface describes the third brief edition as "simpler and shorter," the actual page count and content is roughly the same as in the second. Most likely, then, Puccini's removal results from the haunting presence of negative value judgments that cling to his music. In his preface, Kerman makes the following general comment: "A strong argument can be made that beginning courses in music should introduce students to good music they are most likely to hear" (emphasis mine, ³rd brief edition, vi). Since of all the opera composers in the repertory today, students are most likely to hear Puccini's works (on TV commercials, on the radio, on Broadway, in outdoor summer festivals, as well as in the opera house), his omission becomes significant.

Of course, Kerman is not alone in perpetuating this opinion; as Paul Henry Lang has stated, "Puccini is as universally loved by the public as he is condescended to by the highbrows," a fact born out in his treatment in other music surveys.¹⁴ Puccini receives no mention in Einstein's and Dent's texts, only a few paragraphs in Stolba's, and, perhaps most disconcerting, only one paragraph and no musical examples in Grout's A History of Western Music. The information that Grout provides, moreover, relies on the category "verismo" to contextualize Puccini's operas, listing some components of his "large harmonic palette" and offering only platitudes concerning Puccini's "attention to mood, both psychological and external."² It is astounding, moreover, that this paragraph appeared in a chapter subsection titled "Peripheries" in every edition of this text up to and including the fifth (the latest edition moves it to the chapter "European Music from the 1870s through World War I"). Suffice it to say that even though, as Gossett recently has written, "the arrogance and intolerance that characterized much 'informed' opinion before the 1970s has largely evaporated," most textbooks have yet to notice.¹⁵

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It now remains to investigate the extent to which these themes persist in newly released textbooks. The two I review in the following section, Mark Evan Bonds's A History of Music in Western Culture and Jon Finson's Nineteenth-Century Music: The Western Classical Tradition, serve different readerships — Bonds's is intended for undergraduate music-major survey courses (like Stolba's and Grout's), Finson's for more advanced undergraduate, and possibly graduate, period courses (like Plantinga's). The extent to which each author engages with established textbook traditions is influenced by the demands imposed by these diverse audiences and by space considerations (Bonds surveys Western art music from Antiquity to the present, whereas Finson studies only the nineteenth century). Both authors follow the standard routine of prefacing their studies with a summary of "Romanticism," but each weaves his discussion into a broader narrative of a variety of aesthetic movements influencing music-making during the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Finson, for example, places his treatment of Romanticism beside those of "Empiricism, Realism, Naturalism," and "Historicism and Nationalism," and Bonds explores issues such as the relationship between popular and art music during the nineteenth century. As a result, they are able to accommodate Italian opera as easily as they do German and French genres. Bond's and Finson's discussions of Italian opera are quite distinct, however, and it is to a consideration of each that I now turn.

Mark Evan Bonds, A History of Music in Western Culture

The most praiseworthy feature of Bond's discussion of nineteenth-century Italian opera is the inclusion of a piece of "primary evidence," a two-paragraph excerpt from Stendhal's The Life of Rossini in which the culture-shocked essayist describes a typical audience reaction to a typical Rossini opera in a typical nineteenth-century theater. The scene comes to life through Stendhal's prose, providing the student an excellent first-hand account of the noise and activity that once accompanied performances of these operas (after an aria is concluded, for example, Stendhal informs his reader that "the cataclysm" was "let loose once more"). This passage also indicates that Rossini, witnessing this commotion from his seat at the piano, reacted directly to his audience: Stendhal describes how the composer stood at the behest of "demonic shrieks of Bravo maestro!" and bowed until the next aria began.

What is only implicit in this passage, and yet easily teased out, is that Rossini also acknowledged this praise outside of the opera house, composing music with an eye focused on the mayhem and fashioning individual numbers with the goal of triggering this type of reaction. Thus, among other examples, one can trace Stendhal's description of the opening moments of the performance — as the overture begins, you could hear a pin drop — directly onto Rossini's compositional style. Bonds might have taken the
opportunity to analyze the overture of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in this context: it opens on a fortissimo E-major chord played with gusto by the full orchestra, which is followed immediately by a sneaky, ascending pianissimo melodic line performed by strings and bassoon and answered, equally quietly, by a woodwind choir. The juxtaposition of these musical figures serves a specific purpose: the fortissimo chords call the audience to attention and the soft melodic line forces them to listen silently. This brief description elucidates the symbiotic connection between composer and spectators, explaining much about the music's construction. Unfortunately, rather than tapping into the potential offered by Stendhal's excerpt, Bonds separates it (quite literally, in a shaded box) from the main consideration of Rossini's music and of Italian opera in general. In this way, the author imitates many of his predecessors, avoiding discussion of the collaborative nature of the operatic text in favor of a more composer-driven approach. While he has taken an important step in overcoming this inclination by incorporating Stendhal's commentary, one wishes he had further explored the excerpt's implications for Rossini's music, perhaps in place of the analyses he does include.

In his remarks about Rossini, Bonds mentions some important style characteristics, but without explaining why these features are significant or how they relate to the individual works under consideration. He begins by defining "bel canto" and then alludes to two arias from *Il barbiere di Siviglia*: Figaro's "Largo al factotum" and Rosina's "Una voce poco fa," both included in his accompanying anthology. The implication of mentioning these numbers in close proximity to the description of *bel canto* is that their music is illustrative of the style (difficult as it is to think of "Largo al factotum" as *bel canto*), but Bonds does not follow up on this in the body of the text. In fact, he says strikingly little about this music. "Largo al factotum," for example, "does a wonderful job introducing the title character" through the famous three-note repetitive figure "that has come to be indelibly associated with his character" (421). Beyond these details, Bonds provides no deeper analysis. Instead, he moves to an equally cursory discussion of "Una voce poco fa," where he remarks that the aria is "very much in the bel canto tradition" without any explanation as to what musical features would lead one to such a conclusion. He ends with a brief description of its two-part form. Throughout this discussion Bonds displays a valiant effort to reference a broad spectrum of pertinent issues, but because he allots himself only four paragraphs to do so, he ultimately explains little about Rossini's music. With space at such a premium, Bonds might have had more success had he narrowed his focus to a single topic, whether it was melodic style, form, musical characterization, or an elaboration of Stendhal's excerpt. Moreover, he might have elected to coordinate his discussion of Rossini's music with that of Verdi's, but instead he investigates them as if they emerged from two distinct traditions.

Like many of his predecessors, Bonds skips entirely over Bellini and Donizetti, highlighting Verdi above everyone else. That he eliminates these two (as well as Puccini) from his discussion is not problematic per se. In their absence, however, Bonds succumbs to the "Verdi as savior" paradigm. He draws his examples from *Rigoletto* and uses them to illustrate three "key characteristics of the new approach to the genre: dramatic realism, the use of the *scena* (scene) as the unit of dramatic organization, and dramatically justified virtuosity" (421). None of these characteristics, however, is "new to the genre," all having been worked out years earlier. Bonds's definition of "dramatic realism," for example, has to do with plot — the depiction of "real-life" characters on stage, and *Rigoletto* certainly exemplifies this feature, but so too do Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*, *Anna Bolena*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and so on. Moreover, Bonds's discussion of "dramatically justified virtuosity" is based on the premise that "Verdi never introduces virtuosity for its own sake" (426), but of course the same inaccurate generalization might be applied to Bellini's *oeuvre* as well. Time and again, Bonds's reluctance to recognize Verdi's predecessors distorts what he has to say about Verdi, crediting him with "advances" that were not entirely of his own making. It would be unreasonable to insist that Bonds incorporate detailed discussions of Bellini and Donizetti in addition to his analyses of Verdi's music. His exploration of Italian opera, however, would benefit from a sentence or two explicitly acknowledging that Verdi was only the latest of a large group of composers dedicated to the goal of achieving "dramatic integrity" in their works, and that his music owes a great deal to those who came before him.

**Jon Finson, Nineteenth-Century Music: The Western Classical Tradition**

The concentrated scope of Jon Finson's text allows him the opportunity to tackle the subject of Italian opera at greater leisure. He takes advantage of this situation and presents one of the most thorough discussions of the repertory available in a textbook today. Although he assigns priority to Verdi by writing as much about him as he does about Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti combined, he avoids the pitfalls associated with this approach by examining the latter composers' achievements as individuals, each with something valuable to offer. Finson's book also supersedes most of its predecessors by presenting an extended discussion of the role that Puccini's music played in the development of this genre and the important position it still holds in today's repertory. While one can raise objections to individual details, Finson's chapters on Italian opera present an informative consideration of some of the genre's important musical issues.

Finson approaches each composer in the same manner, opening with succinct biographical background that sum-
marizes education, travels, œuvre, and then turns to analyses of individual musical numbers. Perhaps the most laudable aspect of Finson’s treatment concerns his approach to form: rather than making excuses for the conventions on which much of this music is based, turning away at a perceived lack of “originality,” he focuses almost exclusively on the rewards of the solita forme, exploring how each composer embraced these procedures and relied on them to develop his individual style. Finson’s analysis of the introduzione of Il barbiere di Siviglia is a good case in point: to demonstrate the “typical Rossinian plan” of this number, he provides a detailed diagram outlining its major divisions and accompanies this chart with a vivid description of the musical events in each section. He then extends this discussion to a consideration of Rossini’s “Una voce poco fa,” showing how the two-part aria form embodies principles similar to those of the introduzione. By articulating these connections between ensemble and aria, Finson elucidates the drama behind the Rossinian code, explaining why these forms were so attractive to opera goers during the nineteenth century and why they remain so to the present day. Throughout each analysis, however, Finson skates perilously close to transgressing Dahlhaus’s warning, pointing out that formal conventions permitted Rossini to combine both “inner” and “outer” action to achieve a more “continuous” musical structure. While this Wagnerian preconception does not invalidate all that Finson says about Rossini and the others, it is a detail of which the reader must remain aware.

Drawing on this formal foundation for Rossini’s music, Finson moves to related discussions of Donizetti and Bellini. He analyzes numbers such as the duet, “Mira, o Norma, a’ tuoi ginocchi,” from Bellini’s Norma and the famous sextet from Lucia di Lammermoor, illustrating how both composers adopted conventions and yet used them to develop their individual styles. There could be quibbles over some of Finson’s choices of musical examples: in analyzing two “three-part” arias by Bellini and Donizetti (“Casta Diva” and the mad scene from Lucia di Lammermoor) and not selecting a similarly complex example from Rossini’s operas, for instance, he leaves the impression that Rossini’s arias uniformly consisted of two sections (slow movement/cabaletta), and that his successors “evolved” to include the tempo di mezzo. This tendency, however, is not limited to Finson’s book — Grout also saves the tempo di mezzo for the latter composers. Finson concludes his discussion of the solita forma with Verdi, dividing his career into four periods and analyzing music from the second, “middle” period (excerpts from La traviata) and the fourth, titled “The Experimentation of Old Age” (portions of the Requiem and Falstaff). In his discussion of La traviata he investigates the formal links that bind Verdi to his predecessors, demonstrating that Verdi’s “triumphs” stem as much from his use of convention as from his rejection of it.

The success of Finson’s chapters on Italian opera relies on his attention to one musical issue. Of course, he references others where appropriate — Bellinian melody, orchestral color, and so on — but the primary focal point is form. This approach works well in Finson’s case, but if a singular focus can be effective, one wonders, why concentrate on form? Is it possible to imagine a textbook that considers a wholly different subject? Might not a chapter that looks at nineteenth-century Italian opera through the lens of women’s roles in producing this music reveal just as much about the genre? Or a chapter that takes staging as its center of attention? Or what if a textbook took a different route, exploring all of these features, including form, from the perspective of one opera? These questions are not directed solely to Finson, of course, nor are they confined to nineteenth-century Italian opera. As textbooks become more inclusive in the material they cover, perhaps they might embrace more varied theoretical approaches in discussing their subject matter as well.

Before closing, it is important to raise one concern that affects Finson’s discussion of Italian opera as well as other sections of his book. The author occasionally shies away from confronting contradictions regarding some aspects of a composer’s biography or music, relying instead on generalizations that leading scholars have, of late, thrown into doubt. In his discussion of Verdi’s “first period,” for instance, Finson writes that, “Nabucco took the Babylonian captivity of the Jews as its subject. Their yearning for freedom in choruses such as the famous ‘Va, pensiero’ sounded a patriotic note to Italian audiences” (145). Of course, “Va, pensiero” did serve as an anthem to the Italian public struggling for unity and for an end to foreign occupation of their land, but Roger Parker recently has scrutinized the standard narrative regarding this chorus, demonstrating that it likely did not “sound a patriotic note” until unification was complete.20 Finson’s statement simplifies a host of questions that have surfaced over the past decade regarding the relationship between Verdi’s music and nineteenth-century politics. One might justify his comment by characterizing it as an example of the sort of harmless exaggeration in which textbooks are forced to engage, except that this is only one of many instances where Finson does not take into consideration the most recent scholarship available. Myths concerning Brahms, Gottschalk, Dvořák, and others also surface.21 Although Finson is perfectly justified in drawing a connection between Risorgimento politics and the reception of Verdi’s music — indeed, it is difficult to imagine a textbook not including a description of what “Viva Verdi!” once meant — his discussion would nevertheless benefit from a willingness to explore, if only briefly, the complications that have risen around this issue, sorting through the problems and the debates. The controversy might prove far more educational and informative for the student than the older narrative.

In closing, while Finson’s treatment of Italian opera is the best available among today’s textbooks, there are clear-
ly still many avenues through which it might be improved. Finson provides a good example of what a textbook discussion of nineteenth-century Italian opera might incorporate, but just as important, it also suggests a variety of questions that future authors might pursue, and maybe already are pursuing: I am writing this essay on the eve of the publication of two new textbooks—a thorough revision of Grout's *A History of Western Music* by J. Peter Burkholder and a completely new work by Richard Taruskin. Let us hope, then, that both authors take off where Finson and Bonds leave off, presenting a thoughtful and penetrating glance at nineteenth-century Italian opera and perhaps approaching this genre through alternative lenses that will shed new light on the repertory.

1. My thanks and appreciation to David Rosen, without whose encouragement, ideas, insight, and friendship this review essay would not exist; and to Roger Parker for his comments on an earlier version.


4. Paul Henry Lang, in *Critic at the Opera* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), adopts Einstein's slightly patronizing tone when he writes, "We must beware of approving and judging this Italian opera from the point of view of German or French opera. Even at this stage, Verdi was already the lawfully heir and successor to Rossini and Bellini. Those who call this 'barrel-organ music' do not realize that these melodies come straight from the heart of the Italian people; they are the issue of Italian folk music, hence their simplicity, strength and humanity" (138).

5. Beginning with the publication of the first brief edition (1987), Kerman eliminated the analysis of the Judgment Scene, leaving only that for the Tomb Scene. He also truncated his leisurely narrative of the work in favor of briefer remarks and a "listening chart"—the absence of these descriptions is regrettable.

6. "Still, the Andantino of the first finale [in *Luisa Miller*] differs in one important respect from the type of contemplative ensemble to be found in virtually every opera seria after Rossini: its characters are highly individualized" (210).

7. For a summary of Verdi's flexibility with regard to his scores in the early years of his career, see David Lawton and David Rosen, "Verdi's Non-Definitive Revisions: The Early Operas," in *Atti del III Congresso internazionale di studi verdiani: Milano, Piccola Scala, 12-17 giugno 1972* (Parma: Istituto di Studi Verdiani, 1974), 189-237.


10. Of course, this narrative of Bellini's potential began almost immediately following his death and can be found in commentaries by Hanslick, Berlioz, and many others. Moreover, the characterization of Bellini permeates general surveys up to the present day. Whittall, for example, introduces the composer thus: "had [Bellini] lived longer his success ... and his feeling for innovation, fuelled by his awareness of developments in France, might well have led to much greater things" (*Romantic Music*, 49).


16. For Finson's discussion, see *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 6-8; for Bonds', see *A History of Music in Western Culture*, 350-353.


18. Bonds mentions Bellini and Donizetti twice within the text, the first time in passing during a larger consideration of Verdi's operas, and the second in a list titled "Major Composers of the 19th Century" (468-469). Mention of Puccini appears in two lists: "Opera in the Early 20th Century" (539), and "Major Composers of the 20th Century" (594).

19. Bonds's use of "scena" is confusing, since the word typically refers to recitative preceding a set piece. He may intend "scena" to refer to the multipartite construction of many arias and ensembles (or perhaps "tableaux", "quadri", or "sets"), but the meaning of the term in this context is unclear.


21. In his discussion of Brahms' third symphony, for example, Finson states that the opening F / A-flat / F motive on which much of the first movement is based refers to the composer's personal motto, "Frei aber froh" (198). However, this assumption has been questioned by Michael Musgrave in "Frei aber Froh: A Reconsideration," *19th-Century Music* 3 (1980): 251-258, and although A. Peter Brown contested Musgrave's claim in "Brahms' Third Symphony and the New German School," *Journal of Musicology* 2 (1989): 434-452; here 445, we can by no means say with certainty what sort of extra-musical connotations, if any, Brahms associated with this motto. About Dvořák, Finson writes that, "When Dvořák was thirteen his father sent him to Zlonice to learn the family trade of meat butchering ..." (254). J. Burghauser, however, has since dispelled this myth, showing that the certificate of apprenticeship on which this story was based is a forgery (see "Concerning One of the Myths about Dvořák: Dvořák and the Apprentice Butcher," *Czech Music* 18 (1993-1994): 17-24). And finally, Finson mentions the legal mess in which Louis Moreau Gottschalk found himself, having been accused of conducting an illicit affair with a student in San Francisco, but he neglects to mention that the pianist/composer was eventually cleared of any wrongdoing (274).
p. 27: The roman numeral for m. 5 should read as vii$^7$/V.