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# Cornell University Verdi Study Day 2013: Overview

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### **Abstract**

Includes abstracts by Francesco Izzo ("Quel vecchio': Some Thoughts on Old Age and Aging in Verdi"), Alessandra Campana ("*Otello*, *Falstaff*, and the Scene of Spectatorship"), David B. Rosen ("How Verdi's Minor-Mode Set Pieces End -- i, I, or X? -- and Why"), and Mary Ann Smart ("Art and Revolution Italian Style: Ambivalence and Absolutism in Verdi's Early Operas")

### **Keywords**

Giuseppe Verdi

## Cornell University Verdi Study Day 2013: Overview

David B. Rosen

On 19 October, just one week after the four-day conference sponsored by the American Institute for Verdi Studies—"Verdi's Third Century: Italian Opera Today"—Cornell University hosted "Giuseppe Verdi: A Bicentennial Study Day." Unlike the larger conference, the study day focused on Verdi's *first* century. In addition to the seven papers, listed below, there were two musical interludes: a playing of David Borden's "Birthday Variation for David Rosen" (appropriate for Verdi's birthday, since it samples a recording of the *Messa da Requiem*), and Verdi's 1880 "Ave Maria" and three songs, performed by Judith Kellock, soprano, and Roger Moseley, pianist.

The seven papers presented, three of which (marked with asterisks) appear (in revised form) in this issue of *Verdi Forum*, were as follows:

Francesco Izzo (Senior Lecturer in Music, University of Southampton, and Co-Director of the American Institute for Verdi Studies): "Quel vecchio': Some Thoughts on Old Age and Aging in Verdi"

Alessandra Campana (Associate Professor of Music, Tufts University): "*Otello*, *Falstaff*, and the Scene of Spectatorship"

\*Charlotte Greenspan (Independent scholar, Ithaca, New York): "Verdi Biography via Film"

\*William Rothstein (Professor of Music, Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York): "A Footnote to Harold Powers's 'La dama velata' (on *Un ballo in maschera*, Act II)"

David B. Rosen (Graduate School Professor of Music, Cornell University): "How Verdi's Minor-Mode Solo Slow Movements End—i, I, or X—and Why"

\*John A. Davis (Emiliana Pasca Noether Professor of Modern Italian History, University of Connecticut): "Verdi, the Theater, and Risorgimento Nationalism"

Mary Ann Smart (Gladyce Arata Terrill Professor of Music, University of California, Berkeley): "Art and Revolution, Italian Style: Ambivalence and Absolutism in Verdi's Early Operas"

Abstracts for papers not included in this issue follow here.

“Quel vecchio”: Some Thoughts on Old Age and Aging in Verdi  
*Francesco Izzo*

In early nineteenth-century Italian opera, characters explicitly described as old are mostly a prerogative of comedy. Before *Don Pasquale*, characters of old age are typically depicted as uni-dimensionally negative—petty, mean, and often lecherous. Old age in serious *melodramma* is often implied but rarely stated. For example, characters like Oroveso in Bellini’s *Norma* (1831) and Raimondo in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) are of an age significantly more advanced than others. Only rarely, however, does one encounter characters whose old age is explicitly referred to, either by themselves or others.

In Verdi, conversely, starting with his first operas, old age seems to emerge as a fundamental concern—one that is referred to explicitly with regularity in passages of poetry and by other verbal indicators (such as on the cast page and in stage directions in the librettos). This paper explores the theme of old age in Verdi’s operas from 1839 to 1853, concentrating on examples from *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio*, *Ernani*, *Giovanna d’Arco*, *Attila*, *Macbeth*, *La traviata*, and *Rigoletto*. In doing so, it discusses the relation between old age and honor, the topic of self-commiseration, the influence of Victor Hugo, and ways in which elderly characters in Verdi may reflect changing conceptions of old age in the mid-nineteenth century.

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*Otello, Falstaff*, and the Scene of Spectatorship  
*Alessandra Campana*

It has been noted how the texts of Verdi’s last two operas, *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893), include their *mise en scène*, limiting contemporary stagings to the task of reproduction of the “work.” This paper contends that both operas also stage the encounter with the spectator, in what is here called a scene of spectatorship. These moments reactivate the operas’ performative force, and their aesthetic and ethic potential.

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How Verdi’s Minor-Mode Solo Set Pieces End—i, I, or X?—and Why  
*David B. Rosen*

“Ah fors’è lui” (*La traviata*, Act I) begins in the tonic minor (i) and moves to the parallel major (I) for the reprise of the “Di quell’amor” theme, but in early textless sketches the movement had progressed to III, returned to i, and concluded there. While Verdi’s major-mode solo set pieces (e.g., slow movements of arias) invariably end in the tonic major, the minor mode offers more choices, as the genesis of “Ah, fors’è lui” demonstrates. Of the nearly fifty minor-mode solo set pieces from *Oberto* (1839) through *Un ballo in maschera* (1859) about 63% move to and end in the tonic major, 8% move to “X”, the major mode of another key (III, VI, or in one case, V), and 27% move to a contrasting major mode but return to and end in the tonic minor. (None ends in the minor mode of

another key.) In my paper I offer some observations about reasons for, or at least consequences of, Verdi's departures from his standard operating procedure (i→I).

The medial zone (usually lines 5–6 of a setting of two quatrains) invariably moves to or at least gestures toward the major mode, whether or not the text turns towards a happier mood, perhaps suggesting that Verdi was not overly concerned with shadowing the moods of the text with moves between the major and the minor modes. However, the pieces that return to and end in the tonic minor may be an exception, for they generally do reflect the text, for example in despair / hope / hopes dashed emotional trajectories. In my analyses I introduce a revision of the usual letter-scheme analysis of early- and mid-*ottocento* melodies—one where letters indicate both the sequence of events and the zone (initial, medial, terminal, or the coda space) and therefore function.

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Art and Revolution, Italian Style: Ambivalence and Absolutism in Verdi's Early Operas  
*Mary Ann Smart*

In a classic article, David Rosen shows that Verdi had a pronounced preference for ending his operas with an ensemble of reconciliation centered on the death of a principal character. Characters who were at odds with the conciliatory mood had either to submit to the governing affect or be excluded from the ensemble. In this paper I examine how some of these endings work as conclusions to the drama of individual and societal conflict played out across the length of the opera. Although the operas of the 1840s are usually regarded as muscular displays of passion and simple conflict, their endings exhibit a surprising ambivalence—and some could be described as effectively ending *twice*, with contrasting moods and messages. In *I Lombardi alla Prima crociata* (1843), the caution against religious fanaticism that animates the heroine and runs throughout the opera culminates in the sentimental baptism/death scene of her betrothed. But this comes in the opera's *third* act, whereas the final act celebrates the Lombards' conquest of Jerusalem with aggressively non-inclusive hymns of victory. Similarly, *Ernani* (1844) juxtaposes two very different kinds of reconciliation: the third act shows the newly crowned Holy Roman Emperor pardoning a group of conspirators in a classic gesture of clemency, while the fourth act is impelled by a more arbitrary notion of justice driven by codes of honor, vengeance, and defiance. These ambivalent endings, like the anachronistic recurrences of clemency and royal intervention in the final scenes of *Un ballo in maschera* (1859) and *Don Carlos* (1867), seem to be driven by competing narratives of historical change, of how individuals relate to the state and to power. Thinking seriously about these endings may offer a new perspective on the old question of Verdi's relationship to the politics of the Risorgimento.