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# Verdi Biography via Film

## **Keywords**

Giuseppe Verdi

## Verdi Biography via Film

Charlotte Greenspan

At the start of the biographical movie *Verdi, the King of Melody*, as we see a fragment of a performance of *Otello*, someone in the audience comments, “only Tamagno can sing *Otello* like that.” The voice we hear and the performance we see, however, are not those of Francesco Tamagno but of Mario Del Monaco.<sup>1</sup> But this reenactment, with Del Monaco portraying Tamagno, is also a documentary, preserving a bit of Del Monaco’s performance of *Otello*. And these few minutes of the film encapsulate some of the problems and paradoxes of presenting a composer’s life on film. There are close to a dozen motion pictures about Verdi’s life and works;<sup>2</sup> I deal with only four of them in this paper. Each one I discuss is a representative of a different sub-genre of the biopic—direct documentary, scripted documentary, and narrative film. The borders of these sub-genres are permeable, as already seen in the example from *Verdi, the King of Melody*.

The sub-genres of the biopic can be compared to different types of print biographies. The most accurate genre, in some ways, is the documentary. Documentaries are primary sources. They are to film biography what collections of letters or other documents are to print biography. And, to continue the analogy, there is always a certain amount of editing involved—choosing, arranging, and sometimes annotating the sources used. Some of the earliest motion pictures exhibited to a paying audience were documentaries showing everyday life as it was, captured on film.<sup>3</sup>

Documentaries are significant tools for gaining access to the lives of composers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, there are several important documentary films about Stravinsky.<sup>4</sup> For nineteenth-century composers, of course, documentary footage is largely unavailable, but Verdi is an exception. Charles P. Mitchell, in his *The Great Composers Portrayed on Film*, mentions that, “Verdi’s funeral in Milan was one of the first public events that was filmed and distributed to movie theaters worldwide.”<sup>5</sup> The footage was shot by Italo Pacchioni and is about three minutes

<sup>1</sup> A few minutes of Tamagno singing *Otello*, to piano accompaniment, exists on sound recording and can be accessed on YouTube.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Verdi biopics, see Charles P. Mitchell, *The Great Composers Portrayed on Film, 1913 through 2002* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 264–66 and 292–93.

<sup>3</sup> In the second half of the 1890s, the Lumière brothers were able to shock audiences with *The Arrival of a Train*, amuse them with *The Treacherous Folding Bed*, and entertain them with moving images of workers leaving their factory or of a cat eating from a plate. See Eric Rhodes, *A History of the Cinema from Its Origins to 1970* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 3–28. A recent reference book on documentary films is Ian Aitken, ed., *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2012). A fine brief treatment is Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> A significant documentary film, made while Stravinsky was still alive, is *Igor Stravinsky* (1965, National Film Board of Canada) directed by Roman Kroiter and Wolf Koenig. A later and longer film directed by Tony Palmer, *Aspects of Stravinsky: Once at a Border* (1986, Isolde Films [UK]) makes use of some of the footage from the Kroiter and Koenig film and adds newly shot interviews with family, colleagues, and friends.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *The Great Composers*, 266.

long. This brief newsreel, or at least a part of it, can be viewed on YouTube by keying in the search term “Verdi’s funeral.” The film one sees is not raw, unmediated footage: the person who has posted the video added a soundtrack—a fragment of the “Lacrimosa” from Mozart’s *Requiem* and a fragment of the “Dies Irae” from Verdi’s *Messa da Requiem*. (No credit is given for the performances of the attached music.) But the “wrong” music is not the principal inaccuracy of this documentary. It is also the “wrong” funeral.

Verdi died on 27 January 1901 and was quietly buried on 30 January according to his explicit wishes. His coffin was unadorned, there were no ceremonies, and there was no music. The simple cortege had one or two priests (accounts vary), one or two candles, and a cross.<sup>6</sup> Some 300,000 people turned out to watch this solemn procession and did so in silence. The coffin was taken from the Grand Hotel (Via Alessandro Manzoni, 29), where Verdi died, to Milan’s Cimitero Monumentale (Piazzale Cimitero Monumentale) and lowered into the earth beside the coffin of his wife, Giuseppina, who had died three years earlier.

A month later, on 27 February 1901, the remains of both Giuseppe and Giuseppina Verdi were transferred to the chapel of the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti (Piazza Michelangelo Buonarroti, 29), the rest home for aged and needy musicians, which was one of Verdi’s important philanthropic legacies to Italy. According to William Weaver, “Now there was no preventing a solemn, grandiose ceremony. All Italy, including the House of Savoy, was there to pay homage. Toscanini had arranged the orchestra and the chorus of La Scala on the steps of the central building of the [Cimitero] Monumentale; and as the cortege moved out through the streets of Milan, he conducted the chorus that [... was] Italy’s unofficial national anthem: ‘Va, pensiero’.”<sup>7</sup>

It is this second, grand funeral procession that was captured on film, and through this example we see some of the paradoxes of experiencing a moment of history through documentary film. When we watch this film, we are viewing Verdi’s funeral more than a century after the event, probably alone and on a relatively small screen. What we see is a brief fragment of what the cameraman saw. But we cannot feel the crush of the some 300,000 people who came to view the funeral. And the soundtrack on the YouTube posting gives us the opposite of the experience of profound communal silence, a much commented aspect of the experience. According to Gavin Williams, “in the reporting of Verdi’s funeral, crowd silence became something of a trope. As the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* put it, ‘The absorption of the crowd, the solemn silence, was the most affecting, the most epic salute that Milan could render to this very great artist’.”<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, as this example indicates, even newsreel-style documentary films have some degree of editing. The editing process is more to the fore in a genre that I have thought of calling annotated documentary, scripted documentary, or mediated documentary (but none of these terms is unproblematic).<sup>9</sup> In these non-fiction films

<sup>6</sup> An important discussion of Verdi’s death as a media event is found in Gavin Williams, “Orating Verdi: Death and the Media c. 1901,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 23 (2011): 119–43.

<sup>7</sup> William Weaver, *The Golden Century of Italian Opera from Rossini to Puccini* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 223.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, “Orating Verdi,” 124.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Nichols, in his aptly titled book *Blurred Boundaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 94–95, suggests five modes of documentary representation—expository documentary,

experts or enthusiasts of one sort or another talk about the subject. If newsreel-style documentaries are primary sources, scripted documentaries are secondary sources, comparable to scholarly biographies. Expository and observational documentaries, or at least some of them, start with the idea of go out and see what is there, point the camera, film, then edit.<sup>10</sup> Scripted documentaries start with a plan of what the filmmaker wants to show; filming and editing proceed according to the plan of the script.

An example of scripted documentary is *In the Footsteps of Verdi*. This fifty-two-minute film, written by Alain Duault and Stéphane Ghez and directed by Stéphane Ghez, was released in 2007. It is one in a series of “In the Footsteps” films: other composers in the series include Beethoven, Berlioz, Bizet, Chopin, Liszt, Mahler, Offenbach, Puccini, Tchaikovsky, and Vivaldi. The film has a kind of double focus—on the past and on the present. It shows aspects of Verdi’s life, but it also presents something about what Verdi means to the people who are participating in the making of the film. The film shows the house in Le Roncole where Verdi was born and the Church of San Michele where he studied organ as a boy. We tour important Verdi sites in Busseto, Milan, and Venice. We see the estate at Sant’Agata, where Verdi spent his final decades as a gentleman farmer. Among the people interviewed are the then mayor of Busseto, a seller of Verdi souvenirs in the same town, and musicologist Pierluigi Petrobelli (then Director of the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani in Parma) who is shown receiving a medal from the Club dei 27.<sup>11</sup> We are shown through Sant’Agata by the granddaughter of Verdi’s adopted daughter, and we see the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti, which Verdi founded toward the end of his life, calling it “my best work,” and observe a voice lesson given to a young tenor by one of the residents. Fragments of Verdi’s music—never more than a minute’s worth at a time—are heard throughout the film.

As a means of tying together my discussion of three different films, I will focus on one crucial moment in Verdi’s life and one chorus associated with that moment. Verdi’s third opera, *Nabucco*, which had its premiere at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan on 9 March 1842, was written at a critical juncture in Verdi’s adulthood. The beginning of the 1840s was possibly the lowest point of his life: his two young children had died, his wife had died (all within less than two years of one another), his second opera, *Un giorno di Regno* (1840), had been a flop. For a while, he had decided to give up composing. But the success of *Nabucco* turned everything around. In time, the chorus, “Va, pensiero,” sung in Act IV by a group of Hebrew slaves lamenting their captivity and looking forward, longingly, to the time when they will be free, supposedly became viewed as a rallying cry and an anthem associated with Italians hoping for a united independent

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observational documentary, interactive documentary, reflexive documentary, and performative documentary.

<sup>10</sup> Examples of this type of documentary are those made by Albert Maysles, (*Gimme Shelter* [1970], *Grey Gardens* [1976]), films sometimes labeled “direct cinema.” Maysles told me that his most recent project involves getting on various trains and asking assorted people about why they are making this train trip. He has said, “Remember, as a documentarian you are an observer, the author but not the director, a discoverer, not a controller.”

<sup>11</sup> Giovanni Reverberi, then President of the Club dei 27, explained, “That’s the name of our group of passionate Verdi lovers. We cannot go beyond that number in honor of Verdi’s works. He wrote twenty-seven operas including the *Messa di Requiem*.” I quote the English-translation voiceover heard in the film. The count of twenty-six operas excludes all works that Verdi recast or revised (there are seven more in those categories).

nation.<sup>12</sup> As I mentioned earlier, it was the piece of music chosen for performance at the solemn ceremony accompanying Verdi's reburial.

"Va, pensiero" makes three appearances in *In the Footsteps of Verdi*. We hear the final two phrases, as underscoring, at the start of the film, and the first two phrases from a staged version of *Nabucco*, which segues into an amateur performance of the next two phrases by the Club dei 27. Pierluigi Petrobelli then remarks: "'Va, pensiero' is the only page of Verdi's music that all Italians know." The explanation of the role of Verdi's music in the unification of Italy presented in *In the Footsteps of Verdi* is just one view.<sup>13</sup> Just as *In the Footsteps of Verdi* offers a tour of important places in Verdi's life, it also offers a sampling of myths associated with his life. The remark (twenty minutes into the film) that "it was *Nabucco* that turned Verdi into a symbol for all of Italy," no doubt requires some qualification. Likewise, the remark by Sergio Segalini—"Everybody always dies in Verdi's operas; Verdi was obsessed with the idea of death"—seems to ignore the demands of the genre of serious opera in which Verdi and his contemporaries wrote, regardless of their personal feelings about death. Scripted documentaries thus editorialize—they have an explicit point of view. Although they are meant to be non-fictional, they are not bias-free.

The third genre of biographical motion picture is the biopic—narrative film with actors taking the roles of various historical and invented characters. The book type that this genre is most akin to is historical fiction. The boundaries of these various filmic genres are not fixed: for example, scripted documentaries sometimes make use of reenactments and biopics sometimes incorporate primary documents; there can be faithful reenactments and deceptive documentaries. Of the three genres I am discussing, biopics, of necessity, engage most in compromise. For one thing, narrative films must have dialogue and much or all of this dialogue must be invented. Moreover, biopics work with their own set of conventions—a little like hagiography. New literary or scholarly biographies may appear when new facts are uncovered; biopics frequently prefer to perpetuate accepted myths—sometimes with new embellishments. The composer chosen

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<sup>12</sup> The mythic role of "Va, pensiero" has been re-evaluated by scholars. Roger Parker has pointed out in his important study, *"Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati": The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s* (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 1997) that, "the huge weight of popular and scholarly assumption about the involvement of Verdi's operas with political developments seems again and again to find only scant support in contemporary sources" (22). See, in addition, Parker, "'Va, pensiero' and the Insidious Mastery of Song," in his *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 20–41, and also John A. Davis, "Verdi, the Theater, and Risorgimento Nationalism," and Mary Ann Smart, "How Political were Verdi's Operas? Metaphors of Progress in the Reception of *I Lombardi alla Prima crociata*," both included in this issue of *Verdi Forum*, pp. 30–39 and 40–52, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to the work on this subject by Parker, Davis, and Smart (see note 12 here), there is Philip Gossett, "Edizioni distrutte and the Significance of Operatic Choruses during the Risorgimento," in *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*, ed. Victoria Johnson, Jane Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman, 181–242 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Birgit Pauls, *Giuseppe Verdi und das Risorgimento: Ein politischer Mythos in Prozess der Nationen bildung* (Berlin: Akademie, 1996); Carlotta Sorba, "Ernani Hats: Opera as a Repertory of Political Symbols during the Risorgimento," in *The Oxford Handbook of the New Cultural History of Music*, ed. Jane Fulcher, 428–52 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter Stamatov, "Interpretive Activism and the Political Uses of Verdi's Operas in the 1840s," *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002): 345–66, reprinted by permission in *Verdi Forum* 37–38 (2011–2012): 9–34.

to be portrayed in a film is treated not only as an individual but also as a representative of some set of beliefs—for example, the mixed blessings of being a genius.

Composer biopics frequently resort to certain conventions, such as showing a composer composing, seized by some goading inspiration. Generally there needs to be a woman behind the man. Another convention is a preference for starting the story at the end and then working back through flashbacks. Perhaps the best known example of this is the film about Mozart titled *Amadeus* (adapted from Peter Shaffer's play of the same name), which begins with Antonio Salieri declaring that he has caused Mozart's death. (If not the first, surely the most influential film to tell the story of a person's life by starting at the point of his death is the faux-biopic, *Citizen Kane*.<sup>14</sup>)

There are several biopics of Verdi, the earliest being a silent film, *Verdi nella vita e nella gloria*, made in 1913. According to Mitchell, "Paolo Rosmino, the actor who plays Verdi in the production, reportedly met Verdi and based his interpretation on his personal observations."<sup>15</sup> The biopic I deal with here is one made in Italy in 1953 and released in the United States in a dubbed version with the title *Verdi, the King of Melody*. Written by a committee led by Leonardo Benvenuti, Liana Ferri, and Mario Monicelli and directed by Raffaello Matarazzo, it starred Pierre Cressoy as Giuseppe Verdi and Gaby André as Giuseppina Streponi. The movie begins at the end of Verdi's life, switching between a performance of *Otello* at La Scala and the maestro ill in bed at the Grand Hotel in Milan. It then jumps back to Verdi's early life and continues chronologically to the end. In one scene, set in the winter before the composition of *Nabucco*, Giuseppina Streponi sees Verdi dejectedly trudging through the snow at night. She alights from the carriage she is travelling in and, libretto to *Nabucodonosor* (as it was fully titled) in hand, accosts Verdi. She tells him, "It is the story of the suffering of an oppressed people who long for liberty, just like our people. Like all of us. All I ask is that you read it. Will you, please?" She then slips the libretto into his jacket pocket. During this scene the musical underscoring, played on a solo violin, is the "croce e delizia" phrase from Act I of *La traviata*.<sup>16</sup> Verdi returns to his squalid room and, as he takes off his jacket, the libretto falls to the floor, opening to the page on which the text of "Va, pensiero" is written. Verdi looks at the text and hears in his head the opening phrase of the chorus, a bit of a subsequent phrase, a bit of the accompaniment. The next scene shows him at a desk composing, and this segues into a fully staged performance of "Va, pensiero."

The five-minute excerpt I have just described demonstrates several biopic conventions. We see the composer composing, inspired by the text of the chorus of Hebrew slaves; we see a performance attended by a deeply moved audience (shown in reaction shots), who respond with clamorous applause; and we see a loving woman behind the success of a man. In the scene with Giuseppina, convention trumps truth. We know, from Verdi's own account, given to Giulio Ricordi in 1879, that the person who

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<sup>14</sup> For a fuller discussion of *Citizen Kane* as the source of many biopic conventions, see Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives are They Anyway* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 50–71.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, *The Great Composers*, 292.

<sup>16</sup> With respect to biopics of composers, conventions extend not only to the narrative—the telling of the life—but also to the way the composer's music is brought in. For an excellent discussion of the uses of music—diegetic, non-diegetic, metadiegetic, and supradiegetic—in a selection of biopics about Mozart, see Guido Heldt, "Playing Mozart: Biopics and the Musical (Re)invention of a Composer," *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 3 (2009): 21–46.

pressed the libretto of *Nabucco* on him was the impresario Bartolomeo Merelli.<sup>17</sup> One may wonder, “why not just tell the truth when the truth is known,” and in the case of the composition of *Nabucco*, we have Verdi’s own account (albeit with the possibly skewed perspective of lengthy temporal distance). But, as Edward Dent pointed out in his book on opera, many opera plots would simply fall apart if the characters just spoke honestly and directly to one another.<sup>18</sup> The point is, all art forms have conventions, and the question for the critic is how well the conventions are being used.

The second half of *Verdi, the King of Melody*, is, strangely enough, a kind of reworking of the libretto of *La traviata*. The father (Antonio Barezzi) of Verdi’s deceased wife (Margherita) persuades Giuseppina to break off her relationship with Verdi which, he argues, is bad for Verdi’s career. Sacrificing her own happiness, Giuseppina disappears, leaving Verdi feeling betrayed and bereft. The couple are reunited in Paris at a party attended by Rossini and Donizetti, among others. It is true that when Giuseppe and Giuseppina moved into the house that the composer bought in Busseto, they were shunned by some of the moralistic Bussetans who were unclear as to the couple’s marital status. But Giuseppina was always Verdi’s most loyal and faithful companion; the notion of her ever leaving him is nonsensical.

The final work I discuss is one that blends documentary and biopic. *Verdi*, released in 1982, was created (in Europe) as a television miniseries. This film is remarkable in the biopic genre on two counts. One is its faith that the life of its subject is sufficiently dramatic to stand on its own and can be presented without the injection of fantasized episodes. It is also remarkable for its length—over ten hours. Mitchell noted that “*Verdi* has been critically acclaimed as one of the finest composer miniseries. A British/German/Italian coproduction, *Verdi* was filmed in Italy using many authentic locations associated with the composer.”<sup>19</sup> The film was also released in an English-language version called *The Life of Verdi* (by Kultur Video). In this film there is both reenactment and two kinds of narration. One is the voice of the actor playing Verdi, speaking Verdi’s own words. The other is the voice of a narrator (Burt Lancaster in the US release), filling in historical information. The film tries to be scrupulously accurate, informed by musicological research. Sometimes, in the course of a reenacted scene, the narrator will interject, “Was this how it happened? We don’t know for sure, but...”, or words to that effect.

In the scene in *The Life of Verdi* parallel to the one I just discussed in *Verdi, the King of Melody*, there is one actor plus two narrators. A “Verdi-narrator” gives the words of Verdi himself, reading aloud the autobiographical account that Verdi gave to Ricordi regarding the composition of *Nabucco*. “So I returned home,” the Verdi-narrator says.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Parker (“*Arpa d’or*,” 33) notes that the “so-called Autobiographical Sketch, supposedly dictated by Verdi to his publisher Giulio Ricordi on 19 October 1879 [...] has again and again proved highly unreliable but (understandably perhaps) it is difficult to shake from the public imagination.” The autobiographical sketch was published in Arthur Pougin, *Giuseppe Verdi: Vita aneddotica con note ed aggiunte di Folchetto* (Milan: Ricordi, 1881; reprint, Florence: Passigli, 1989), and an English translation by James E. Matthew as *Verdi: An Anecdotic History of His Life and Works* (London: H. Grevel; New York: Scribner & Welford, 1887); a more readily available English translation can be found in William Weaver, comp. and ed., *Verdi: A Documentary Study* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977); published in Italian as *Verdi: Immagini e documenti* (Florence: Becocci, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Edward J. Dent, *Opera* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1949). The first chapter gives a humorous and common-sense discussion of the conventions of opera.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, *The Great Composers*, 292.



We see the libretto fall to the ground. He continues, “When falling, the libretto had remained partially opened. My eyes immediately caught the verse which headed the page. It read, ‘Fly, oh thoughts, on wings of gold’.” We then hear the on-screen Verdi say, “Va, pensiero, sull’ali dorate.” The Verdi-narrator goes on, “It was almost a paraphrasing of the Bible, the Bible which I so often read.” The film’s commenting narrator then remarks:

It was the Lamentations of Jeremiah which he had once set to music in a time which seemed now so remote and happy. Margherita singing in the chorus, the Barezzi’s warm kitchen, Signora Maria [Margherita’s mother] preparing the hot spiced wine, the fire blazing.... This is one of the most moving pages in the Bible. The people of Israel taken prisoner, in chains, dragged to Babylon in exile where they sat down and wept at the thought of their distant, lost home.

During this narration we see a flashback scene to a performance of Verdi’s *Lamentations of Jeremiah* (and also to the Barezzi’s kitchen).<sup>20</sup> The scene then shifts back to Verdi’s room. We see Verdi get into his bed and the Verdi-narrator says, “Resolved as I was not to write, I took courage, closed the libretto, and went to bed, but to no avail. *Nabucco* had already taken hold of me. Sleep would not come.” We see Verdi get out of bed. “I had to get up.” We see Verdi light a lamp, coughing. The Verdi-narrator says, “I read the book not once but two, three times that same night.” The commenting narrator adds, “Merelli was right. It was a beautiful libretto and what is more, it seemed written to order for Verdi and after barren months it fired in him that imagination that seemed exhausted.”

These two scenes present two different enactments of the words Verdi set down in the autobiographical sketch. They are, in a sense, different illustrations of the act of composing. *The Life of Verdi*, following the words of the sketch more closely, emphasizes the composer’s struggle to resist the temptation to compose and his finally giving in. *Verdi, the King of Melody*, compresses the blossoming out of the creative idea—from words to melody to full orchestration—into about two minutes, after which the composing scene segues into a staged full performance of the chorus.

There are many advantages to learning about a composer’s life through biopics. But there are also problems inherent in the genre. One problem has to do with the selection process. Most commercial biographical films (television miniseries being an important exception) are more or less two hours long. Anyone who has struggled with selecting which parts of his or her professional life to include in a brief curriculum vitae can sympathize with the task of a writer who must condense the life of a composer—including time to play the composer’s music—into two hours of screen time. In addition, decisions need to be made regarding matters of accuracy and authenticity. Scholarly biographies in book form vary in the degree to which they reach a goal of accuracy; in motion-picture biographies the value or the desirability of accuracy is by no means assumed. This is apparent not only with regard to the “facts” of the life presented but also in the matter of how things look and how characters sound. Movies, of course, are made collaboratively, with many decision-makers. One set of people is responsible for sets, another for costumes, another for makeup and hairstyles. For all these decisions, authenticity or accuracy may or may not play a decisive role. For example, in *Verdi, the*

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<sup>20</sup> The work is no longer extant; I have not yet identified the music used in the film.

*King of Melody*, the actress playing Giuseppina Strepponi, Gaby André, has bright red hair although portraits show us that Giuseppina was a brunette. (A portrait of Giuseppina, hanging in the Museo Teatrale alla Scala, can be seen in *In the Footsteps of Verdi*.) The director of *The Life of Verdi*, Renato Castellani, said that he had been in negotiations with several Italian actors, but there were problems with time commitments and salary. However, when he looked into British actor Ronald Pickup's eyes, he knew he had found his Verdi. Whatever he saw about the actor's eyes, it was not the actual color. Verdi's passport says his eyes were grey. In the famous portrait of Verdi done in 1886 by Giovanni Boldini, his eyes appear to be blue.<sup>21</sup> Pickup's eyes are brown. I do not quibble about this for the sake of criticizing but rather to reiterate the point that films about Verdi, and indeed about all composers, are a series of compromises.

Problems about how characters should sound are even more intractable and require an even greater willing suspension of disbelief. An English-speaking audience knows, of course, that Verdi (and everyone around him) spoke Italian, not English. But decisions need to be made by the filmmakers regarding what kind of English he will speak in a film for such an audience. American accent? British accent? Upper-class speech or something reflecting a regional dialect? In *The Life of Verdi*, Verdi is played by the British actor Ronald Pickup and Giuseppina is played by the Italian ballerina Carla Fracci. In the English-language version, Pickup's voice is his own and Fracci's is dubbed; I am assuming that in the Italian-language version Fracci's voice is her own (except for when Giuseppina sings) and Pickup's is dubbed. In one scene, Richard Wagner appears: he speaks English with a German accent. Is this to remind the audience that Wagner was a German composer, or that he must have spoken Italian with a German accent? The very fact that there are so many inherent problems and so many decisions and compromises to be made is one reason that the biopic is such a fascinating genre to study.

Any opera lover knows that one of the glories of opera is its multi-level appeal. It makes its effect through both sight and sound, and it appeals to both the intellect and the emotions. To some extent, the same case can be made for learning about a composer's life through motion pictures. Viewers can hear the composer's music while seeing the surroundings, extant or recreated, in which the music was composed or first performed. They can see costumes and settings; they can see the spirit of the characters made flesh. They can learn facts about a composer while being swept up in the drama of a composer's life. To continue the comparison, one must acknowledge that the intentions of the creator must be taken into account. We can assume, for example, that Verdi did not write *Don Carlos* for the sake of teaching the audience about the history of the Flemish uprising against the Spanish throne. But if one becomes intrigued with the characters—and this is true of any opera on a historical subject, from Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* to Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer*—one may wish to pursue the historical facts. Likewise, biopics are unlikely to be the last word about their subjects, but they may form an excellent beginning.

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<sup>21</sup> Boldini's portrait can be viewed on numerous websites; see, for instance, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AVerdi.jpg>. For a list of books providing various kinds of Verdian iconography, see Gregory W. Harwood, *Giuseppe Verdi: A Research and Information Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 39–42.