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Review: "The Life and Operas of Verdi" by Robert Greenberg

Keywords

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The Life and Operas of Verdi
by Robert Greenberg
(Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company, 2003)

David B. Rosen

Robert Greenberg, *The Life and Operas of Verdi*, 32 lectures, each 45 minutes in length, available on CD, DVD, or audio download, accompanied by a course booklet and, for an additional fee, a “lightly edited” transcript of the audio component.

In a perceptive review essay (published in *Verdi Forum*), Hilary Poriss discussed the treatment of Verdi and Italian opera in some textbooks intended for college-level music history courses.¹ I consider here another genre in Verdi reception: an independent “course” of recorded lectures. The Teaching Company’s series of “Great Courses” includes hundreds of courses on a variety of subjects in the humanities, social sciences, STEM disciplines, and even “Better Living” (including yoga, cooking, etc.). Most of the academic courses are taught by college/university professors specializing in the particular field (e.g., Shakespeare, medieval European history). The lectures approximate the intellectual level of a college course, though one without outside readings, since most of the courses are self-contained.

Unfortunately, the situation is quite different with music. All twenty-six courses on “classical music” are taught by Professor Robert Greenberg (Ph.D. in Composition, University of California, Berkeley), “Music-historian-in-Residence at San Francisco Performances.” This would be rather like assigning all of the courses in the sciences, from astronomy to zoology, to Dr. Science (“He knows more than you do. He has a Master’s degree . . . in Science”). A specialist in *ottocento* opera would have created a much better course about Verdi. Greenberg’s lectures are geared to a much lower level than would be found in a college course, both in style (the near-constant jokes, most based on the premise that opera is silly) and dumbed-down content. If the comments on The Teaching Company’s website are to be trusted, almost all of the students/customers enjoy the course immensely, finding it entertaining. On the contrary, I find the style and delivery embarrassing, but *de gustibus* ... In this review, however, I focus on the content, not the style.

As the title of the course suggests, Verdi’s life, including the historical events impinging upon it, receives substantial attention. The information is drawn primarily from Mary Jane Phillips-Matz’s biography of the composer. There are extended quotations attributed to Phillips-Matz, but also instances of close paraphrase without attribution. One unfortunate example:

¹ Hilary Poriss, “Testing Textbooks: The Case for Italian Opera,” *Verdi Forum* 28–29 (2001–2002): 49–58.

Writing an opera based on Shakespeare constituted a risk in its own right, because no Shakespeare play had been produced in a public theater in Italy until 1842, when *Othello* was given in Milan. Even though the leading actor was the celebrated Gustavo Modena, the work was a fiasco, with the audience first whispering, then laughing and howling with derision, forcing the company to ring down the curtain and end the performance.²

In Greenberg's garbled version, the actor Gustavo Modena, an important figure in Italian theatrical history, is transformed into a tenor, Shakespeare's play into Rossini's opera:

. . . In 1842, Rossini's *Otello* was revived and given its Milan premiere with the celebrated tenor *Gustavo Modena* in the title role. *The performance was a fiasco. The audience began whispering* from almost the beginning; then they began to giggle and *laugh*, and finally, they began to *howl with derision, forcing the management to lower the curtain* and thus, prematurely *end the performance*. A second performance did not take place [my emphasis; Lecture 8].

Need I spell out what would happen if I received this in an undergraduate paper?

The biographical information is generally accurate, but Verdi's works are the primary reason that we are interested in his life. Too often in this course it seems irrelevant that Verdi was a composer, rather than a sculptor, or even a statesman or the founder of a farm empire. One example: Greenberg discusses the revolutions of 1848 in his typical style—"The news of the hated Metternich's downfall hit Milan like a forty-ton cannelloni [*sic*] dropped from the roof of the Galleria [*sic*—it wasn't constructed for another two decades]." However, after Greenberg discusses the Cinque Giornate and quotes a few of Verdi's patriotic comments, we are eager to hear how Verdi *the composer* reacted to these events: the composition of the *Inno popolare* "Suona la tromba" and "the most explicitly patriotic of [his] operas,"³ *La battaglia di Legnano*, premiered during the short-lived Roman Republic in January 1849. But we hear nothing of that, for the story shifts immediately to Giuseppina's trials and tribulations in provincial Busseto. Nonetheless, the course's treatment of Verdi's biography, despite its flaws, is far superior to that of his works, to which I now shift.

The lectures are arranged chronologically. After two introductory lectures, the remaining thirty combine consideration of Verdi's biography and his works. Sixteen operas and the *Messa da Requiem* receive some attention, but only *Rigoletto* and *Falstaff*, the subject of five and seven lectures, respectively, are studied in more than two lectures. I start with a typical example, one based on a familiar passage. When Greenberg reaches the Quartet in *Rigoletto*, he writes:

² Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 193–94.

³ Douglas L. Ipson, "battaglia di Legnano, La," *The Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia*, ed. Roberta Montemorra Marvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50–54, at 50.

We have arrived at the famous quartet, which is sort of like saying, “Okay, we’ve arrived at the rim of the Grand Canyon; everyone get out and take a look.” I mean, here we are, at the heart and soul, the sonar plexus of nineteenth-century Italian opera, the greatest operatic ensemble composed since Mozart, and, because of the terrible poverty of language, all we can say is, “Okay, we’ve arrived at the third act quartet of *Rigoletto*; everyone get out and take a listen.” Oh well.
[Lecture 13]

But a geologist or even a qualified tour guide would have much of interest to say about the Grand Canyon, and one offering a course on Verdi’s operas should have much more to say about this ensemble than what Greenberg offers. The poverty is one of ideas, not of language, and it is a crucial defect in this course.

After a plot summary, Greenberg continues:

Now the quartet, as the four participants, split into two groups of two, the Duke and Maddalena, and Rigoletto and Gilda, simultaneously express their very different emotional states and views. First the Duke, who sings to Maddalena [RG reads English translation of the Duke’s text, acting it out in comically exaggerated melodramatic fashion].

What might one say about this melody that would be comprehensible to students lacking a musical background? Unfortunately, the course never explains how Verdi’s melodies are constructed, the so-called “lyric prototype.” Greenberg might have pointed out that the Duke’s melody in the *Rigoletto* quartet is a standard $a^4 a'^4 b^4 a'^4$ (where the superscript numbers indicate the number of measures). (Yes, students *can* hear this.) But there are two interesting features. First, the text consists of a sestet, rather than the more common two quatrains, so that Verdi had to repeat text: both statements of the a'^4 phrase have the same text. Later in his career, Verdi would sometimes set sestets as a tighter three-phrase structure.⁴ Second, internal repetitions within the phrases impose a rather breathless, urgent quality. That is, each of the first two four-measure phrases actually consists of two statements of a two-measure idea, as though it had gotten stuck (a), and then a third statement where the motive seems to free itself and finally take wing, continuing for another measure (a'). Paradoxically, despite the melodic segmentation, the harmonic underpinning makes us perceive a single eight-measure arc, without the usual strong caesura between the two four-measure units. A similar procedure is found in the b^4 phrase. This often consists of a statement and a restatement of a two-measure unit ($b^2 b'^2$), but here there are three statements of a “stuck” one-measure motive that finally give way to a measure that reaches to the theme’s highest note, before falling downward to lead into the final phrase (a'^4).

A quibble: Greenberg claims that the Duke “sings to Maddalena,” but, although the tenor portraying the Duke sings here (and indeed, every time he makes an utterance in the opera), the Duke (i.e., the character) does not. He speaks to her. The Duke (i.e., the character) will later sing “La donna è mobile,” a diegetic stage song (it would be heard

⁴ Joseph Kerman, “Lyric Form and Flexibility in *Simon Boccanegra*,” *Studi Verdiani* 1 (1982): 47–62.

as a song by everyone within earshot). Greenberg doesn't explore the difference. He continues:

Maddalena, still keeping her distance, laughs at the Duke [RG reads text].

Of course, Maddalena tells us as much ("Ah! ah! Rido ben di core"), but so does her music. Her staccato notes, doubled by chuckling flute and clarinet, *perform* the act of laughing.⁵ This is a useful way of thinking about some passages in opera (for example, death scenes), but there is nothing about that in this course. Greenberg continues:

Gilda, finally finding her voice, sobbingly, sings more to herself than to Rigoletto [RG reads text].

It would have been helpful to sing or to play on the piano those neighbor notes that depict Gilda's sob, but Greenberg never isolates and analyzes individual moments before playing the entire recorded excerpt. And he might usefully have linked Gilda's sobbing, lament figure to the "lamento" figures that will be heard in the "Miserere" and the "Lacrymosa" of the *Messa da Requiem* in later lectures, but there are virtually no cross-references from one work to another.

Gilda "*finally* finds her voice"? Yes, reading the printed libretto it may seem that she waits a long time before reacting, her quatrain placed only after the Duke's sestet and Maddalena's sestet. But in Verdi's setting, Gilda does not wait for Maddalena to exhaust her text but rather enters only one measure after her, that is, after Maddalena has sung only two lines of her text. Note, too, the different rates of delivery of the text: the Duke moves through a line of text in two measures, Gilda does so in one measure at first, while Maddalena laughs her way through two lines of text in a single measure.

Greenberg concludes his examination of the ensemble:

The lesson learned, or so he thinks, Rigoletto turns to his daughter and, doing his best to console her, sings [RG reads text].

Greenberg says nothing about how the voices combine once they have all entered but proceeds to play the ensemble, followed by gushing "Only Mozart could have done it as well." He "analyzes" the scene as though it were a play. The only reference to the function of the music is a single word, "sobbingly." I would be disappointed if students at the end of my undergraduate non-major opera course were unable to offer insights superior in understanding to Greenberg's vapid comments.

In one of the final lectures, I was pleasantly surprised to find a remarkably apt characterization of a passage in Act II of *Falstaff*: Mistress Quickly "enters to the strains of a dignified, stately, old-style, minuet-like tune, that features a deep curtsy built right into it" (Lecture 29). Why had Greenberg not shown this acuity in previous lectures, I wondered. But then I saw that it was simply a verbose paraphrase of Julian Budden's

⁵ See Marco Beghelli, "Per un nuovo approccio al teatro musicale: L'atto performativo come luogo dell'imitazione gestuale nella drammaturgia verdiana," *Italica* 64 (1987): 632-53, here 637-39.

phrase: “enters to a stately minuet-like theme with a deep curtsey built into it.”⁶ What I thought was exceptional in the course is quite normal in Budden’s book.

Although there are some exceptions, Greenberg’s opera-by-opera approach, without cross-references or summary lectures on particular issues, sacrifices generalizations spanning Verdi’s output—generalizations about both his musical dramaturgy and what might be termed ideological issues. Here are a few examples of neglected areas:

- Verdi’s creative process, including choosing the subject for an opera, turning a literary model (e.g., a Victor Hugo play) into a libretto, and the composition of the music (sketches, the skeleton score, the orchestration, and revisions).
- The conventions. There is an inaccurate description of the conventional form of the duet (“typical three-part template: fast, slow, fast”⁷—Lecture 3) but nothing about how Verdi’s operas begin or end, or for that matter, his treatment of the internal finale. At one point, Greenberg claims that Verdi has abandoned conventions, but this means little, since we never had an accurate description of the supposedly abandoned conventions.
- Verdi’s dramaturgy: how he uses recurring themes; the use of stage (diegetic) music; how he depicts deception and disguises; how he shows agreement and disagreement, etc.
- Staging Verdi’s operas: then and now.
- And, turning to what I have called “ideological issues,” how does Verdi treat x, where x could be gender/sex, relationship of parents (usually fathers) and their children, the “other” (gypsies, women in harems), religion, etc.

I have thus far focused on the course’s “crimes of omission,” points that “should have been made” but were not. But there are also plenty of “crimes of commission”: outright errors. Here is a sample:

Monterone’s daughter was abducted and raped by the Duke, as punishment for Monterone’s criticism of the Duke’s blasphemous behavior and libidinous lifestyle. [Lecture 11]

Had he bothered to look, Greenberg could have found the explanation for Monterone’s wrath in the sources. In the opera, Rigoletto tells us that Monterone conspired against the Duke, who pardoned him (“Voi congiuraste contro noi . . .”), and the literary source of the opera, Victor Hugo’s play *Le Roi s’amuse*, clarifies that the old man’s daughter became the King’s mistress to obtain that pardon.

⁶ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols., rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), III: 472.

⁷ And so Greenberg parses the Abigail/Nabucco duet (*Nabucco*, Act III) as follows: the *tempo d’attacco* is his Part 1; the slow movement and *tempo di mezzo* together form Part 2; the cabaletta is Part 3 (Lecture 5). In his treatment of the Leonora/Oberto duet (*Oberto*, Act I), his Part 1 includes the *scena* and the *tempo d’attacco*. He does not recognize the structural difference between the two (Lecture 3).

There are errors that make me wonder whether Greenberg knows the operas beyond the passages he covers. In discussing the opening of the Overture of *La forza del destino*, Greenberg refers to “a gentle, lyric theme that will later be associated with Leonora,” but it is actually the theme heard in the Alvaro/Carlo duet preceding their fatal duel in Act IV (“Le minaccie, i fieri accenti”) [Lecture 18]. And here is Greenberg on the beginning of Act IV in *Otello*: “If Iago is the personification of evil, then Desdemona is the personification of good, a genuinely Christ-like figure, *who now realizes that only through the sacrifice of her own life can she restore the sanity of her husband*” (my emphasis). How could anyone familiar with the murder scene, in which Desdemona pleads for her life, and the end of the opera, with Otello’s suicide, write such nonsense?

In the scene of the drawing of lots in Act III of *Un ballo in maschera*, before Amelia’s entrance, “Three times the trumpet call is heard, each time a semitone higher than the last. The tension builds” [Lecture 16]. This is a rare and welcome attempt to make a point about expression (the rising tension) based on the music (the chromatic ascent). The main point is correct, but the trumpet call is heard in full not three but six times (plus two partial statements). Later, describing the orchestral passage heard as Amelia draws the slip of paper from the vase, Greenberg includes “harmonic progressions of consecutive dissonances called diminished-seventh chords” in his list of “stock-in-trade melodramatic orchestral device[s],” but there is only one diminished-seventh chord in the passage [Lecture 17].

Until Lecture 14 Greenberg has said nothing about the structure of the libretto text, not even the distinction between unrhymed *versi sciolti* for recitative and rhymed *versi lirici* for *parlante* and set pieces. Nor has he explored the complex interplay of metrical and musical structure in general. He takes the Gypsy chorus (“Anvil Chorus”) at the beginning of Act II of *Il trovatore* as an example of Verdi’s avoiding “the trap of being restricted, musically ‘straightjacketed,’ by the text’s rhyme schemes.” Each of the two stanzas of chorus’s text consists of six lines of *quinario doppio* followed by a single *quinario* line. Verdi repeats the sixth line (see below), adding urgency to the question (“Who brightens the gypsy man’s life?”), and then uses the single, final *quinario* for the answer (“the gypsy girl”), rather like the “punch line” found in some metrically similar texts.⁸ Here is the text of the first stanza, with the rhyme scheme:

A Vedi! le fosche notturne spoglie
 B De’ cieli sveste l’immensa vòlta;
 A Sembra una vedova che alfin si toglie
 B I bruni panni ond’era involta.
 C All’opra! all’opra! Dàgli, martella,
 C Chi del gitano i giorni abella?
 C La zingarella!

But Greenberg represents the rhyme scheme of the first five lines as ABABCC, dividing the fifth line into two lines, which, however, do not rhyme:

⁸ On the rhetorical functions of the shift from *doppi* lines to a single line, see James A. Hepokoski, “Genre and Content in Mid-Century Verdi: ‘Addio, del passato’ (*La traviata*, Act III),” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1 (1989): 249–76, here 258–59.

- C All'opra! all'opra!
C Dàgli martella.

He then mentions the remaining two lines, but without any attempt to describe their rhyme scheme or to integrate them with the previous five lines. Given this complete misunderstanding of the metrical structure of the text, and the absence of any comment about the structure of the music, it is impossible to evaluate or even understand Greenberg's claim that "Verdi sets the words [. . .] without ever falling into the trap of being restricted, musically 'straightjacketed,' by the text's rhyme schemes."

Arousing interest in and enthusiasm about Verdi and his works is a worthy goal, but why could that not be achieved with accurate and useful information, information that equips the students to approach Verdi operas unfamiliar to them? This course is unworthy of the composer, his music, and the study of opera in general. It should be recalled.