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Review of Abramo Basevi's 'The Operas of Giuseppe Verdi' (edited by Stefano Castelvechi)

Reviews

edited by

Gregory W. Harwood

Abramo Basevi: The Operas of Giuseppe Verdi
Edward Schneider and Stefano Castelvechi, trans.
Stefano Castelvechi, ed.
(University of Chicago Press, 2013)

Scott L. Balthazar

Whether garden path, Eightfold Path, or (realistically) something in between,¹ Abramo Basevi's *Studio sulle opere di Giuseppe Verdi* (*Study of the Operas of Giuseppe Verdi*, 1859), the first published monograph on the composer's operas, continues to serve present-day Verdians as an obligatory touchstone. Previously available as a facsimile reprint and in a modern edition, it is now even more accessible to English-language readers in a lucid and meticulously annotated translation by Edward Schneider and Stefano Castelvechi.²

Basevi's lasting influence owes much to his impressive credentials. One of Florence's leading mid-century intellectuals, active in fields as disparate as medicine, philosophy, history, and religion, and conversant with the operatic repertoires and music criticism of various eras and nationalities, Basevi played a leading role in Florentine musical life. As a critic, concert promoter, editor, and academic, he advocated for Meyerbeer's perceived fusion of Italian melody and German intellect, for Wagner's works and theories (temporarily), for northern European instrumental music and historical opera, and most generally for a rapprochement between music in Italy and elsewhere. A would-be composer, Basevi completed two (staged) operas—*Romilda ed Ezzelino* (1840) and *Enrico Howard* (1847)—which were admired by at least some devotees, though received more coolly by the public and by critics, who judged the latter work unoriginal. In his preface to the *Studio*, Basevi positioned himself as a crusader for higher standards of Italian criticism, marching beside fellow French, Belgian, and German counterparts. And he shouldered the mantle of ardent mentor, providing, for the benefit of composers and audiences alike, technical analysis and historical context that elucidated the unique features of Verdi's compositional style and soberly adjudicated its strengths and weaknesses. A professed subversive, he called out the preeminent composer of his day, challenging what he regarded as Verdi's untempered

¹ I allude, of course, to Roger Parker's cautionary tale "'*Insolite forme*,' or Basevi's Garden Path," in *Verdi's Middle Period, 1849–1859: Source Studies, Analysis, and Performance Practice*, ed. Martin Chusid (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 129–46 (and to Buddhist teachings).

² Abramo Basevi, *Studio sulle opere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Bologna: Antiquae Musicae Italicae Studiosi, 1978); and Abramo Basevi, *Studio sulle opere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Ugo Piovano (Milan: Rugginenti, 2001).

sensuality, his dependence on old-fashioned habits (forms, rhythms, accompaniments), and the moral depravity of his most appealing operas (particularly *Rigoletto* and *La traviata*).

Castelvecchi's succinct yet broadly pitched Introduction to the new edition contributes invaluable background for engaging with Basevi's remarks. It includes an overview of the *Studio* and of its origins in a series of previously published journal articles, information regarding contemporary reception of the *Studio*, and discussion of its historical importance and ubiquitous presence in current Verdi scholarship. And it provides a brief survey of Basevi's biography and credentials, a level-headed assessment of his importance and his many strengths and innovations, a summary of his principal themes and lines of argument, and an explanation of the approach taken by Castelvecchi in the translation and critical apparatus.

Front matter continues with a glossary of forty Italian technical terms, many of which have received scant attention. It provides cogent decryptions of Basevi's usages and occasional ambiguities (e.g., cabaletta as movement vs. melody, p. xxviii), and useful cross references to related terms.³ As compiled by Castelvecchi, the Basevi lexicon is a treasure trove for researchers, drawing attention to a host of issues—e.g., “effetto di ansietà,” “di getto,” “preparazione,” “quadro musicale,” “slancio,” “effetto di sonorità,” and “ritmo staccato”—that attest to Basevi's interest in aspects of style ranging well beyond the allusions to form that have received so much attention. (One quibble: a complete set of page references here or in the index would have been helpful, because each term appears numerous times scattered throughout the book.) The glossary's preface includes brief discussions of Italian formal conventions for poetic versification and of the division of scores into pieces and movements, discrepancies between autograph manuscripts and printed scores in the latter respect, and occasional divergences between Basevi's designations of numbers (which apparently followed printed sources) and those of autographs and modern critical editions (which Castelvecchi has clarified in footnotes). An editorial note explains adjustments of titles of pieces and of quotations of other lines of text to match standard sources, normalizing of names of people and places, conversions to modern spellings, and retention of other inconsistencies where Basevi's references are clear.

Castelvecchi's critical apparatus extends throughout his exhaustive amplifications of Basevi's text, which range from correcting Basevi's occasional inaccuracies to explaining his choices of examples, more precisely identifying passages cited, clarifying technical terms, providing stylistic precedents in works by Verdi or other composers, identifying obscure passages of music, music theory, poetry, literature, philosophy, or history cited obliquely by Basevi, and explaining specific editorial choices. Literature on Basevi is introduced through a list of citation abbreviations and through footnotes in the front matter and elsewhere, although a complete bibliography would have been welcome.

Schneider and Castelvecchi's translation is itself eminently clear and readable, doing as much as one could expect in making sense of Basevi's often perplexing wordings and in shedding the most flattering light on his ideas. At the same time, the transparency of the translation exposes the *Studio*'s many undeniable weaknesses. Both Roger Parker and Jesse Rosenberg have demonstrated ways in which personal circumstances and cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical preconceptions shaped Basevi's analytical preoccupations and often

³ Page numbers given in the text refer to Schneider and Castelvecchi's edition.

questionable interpretive assumptions.⁴ In particular, Basevi's reputation has suffered collateral damage in Parker's assault on Harold Powers's zealous advocacy for a holistic, "multivalent" analytical model directed by historical viewpoints and, more generally, on modern empiricist theoretical inclinations and the tendency to privilege contemporary commentary.⁵ Although he finds much to recommend, Parker has noted that Basevi's religious leanings and the colossal chip on his shoulder following the failure of *Enrico Howard* a decade earlier contributed to his prudish rejection of several librettos, his preoccupation with Verdi's originality (or lack thereof), and his derision of mainstream Italian music criticism and the opera-going public, all of which inevitably undercut his credibility.⁶

Rosenberg's examination of Basevi's philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings across the entire corpus of his writings has also identified a number of assumptions that impelled various critical and analytical idiosyncrasies. Basevi's aspiration toward dispassionate empiricism (one that he fulfilled only in part); his ennoblement of music, music criticism, and music history; his differentiation of intellect from beauty and, consequently, pleasure from sensuality; and his dedication to progress and originality explain, to varying degrees, a host of tendencies. Among these are his obsessive evaluation of scenes, movements, and even individual musical phrases on a case-by-case basis, his sermonizing against immorality and a prosaic herd mentality, his adoption of dramatic appropriateness as his critical yardstick, his elevation of Meyerbeer over Verdi, his preoccupation with novelty and deprecation of conventional forms, rhythms, accompaniments, and his disapproval of Verdi's "vigorous" yet allegedly regressive harmonic style. While revealing a certain method to Basevi's madness, Rosenberg reminds us that the *Studio*, like all critical writings to one

⁴ Parker, "'*Insolite forme*'"; and Jesse Rosenberg, "Abramo Basevi: A Music Critic in Search of a Context," *The Musical Quarterly* 86 (2002): 630–88.

⁵ Parker, "'*Insolite forme*,'" pp. 129–32; and Harold S. Powers, "'La solita forma' and 'The Uses of Convention,'" *Acta musicologica* 59 (1987): 65–90. Parker chides Powers and the rest of us for ignoring context and misappropriating theoretical statements in the service of modern arguments, in particular Basevi's overriding conception of form as a succession of localized events rather than as a broader sectional schema. (Perhaps the garden path is ours?) But Parker overplays his hand when he targets one of the many ambiguities in Basevi's prose to contest his engagement with four-movement duet form. Regarding the Violetta/Germont duet (*La traviata*, Act II), he contends that "Basevi's description shows no 'awareness of the pattern' that Powers considers essential" and that Basevi "mentioned no overarching structure" (p. 142). But Basevi did, in fact, distinguish "Violetta's cantabile ['Dite alla giovane'], which starts at the 6/8 *Andantino*," from the preceding series of melodies—which would logically be the *tempo d'attacco* in his four-movement schema, and takes note of "Germont's reply 'piangi, piangi'" and "the *insieme* bars that follow" and "bring to a close the *Andantino*"—which constitute standard elements in the *forma variata* of a duet slow movement. Then "a brief recitative and a *parlante* [presumably the *tempo di mezzo*] lead to the cabaletta." (Parker's translation of Basevi, p. 142.) Although Basevi named only two of the four movements, he clearly recognized the main joints of the conventional form. And while Basevi "true to his usual method . . . travelled over the surface" (p. 142) in praising the form of this duet, which "is absolutely new in the variety of its *cantilene*" (Parker's translation, p. 141), he in no way disputed the adherence of such a novel succession of themes to a broader formal outline. Thus, Parker's assertion that "as soon as the boundaries of these forms became at all stretched, [Basevi] was immediately willing to abandon them" seems overstated. Similarly, his assumption that "if we cannot document a level of 'audience expectation' for complex manipulations of '*la solita forma*' through him [Basevi], then I doubt that we will find it elsewhere" (p. 142) is contradicted by Carlo Ritorni's extensive descriptions of these forms. See Ritorni's *Ammaestramenti alla composizione d'ogni poema e d'ogni opera appartenente alla musica* (Milan: L. di G. Pirola, 1841), especially pp. 40–58.

⁶ Parker, "'*Insolite forme*,'" pp. 132–33, 135, 143–45.

extent or another, is a product of intellectual predispositions and is no doubt more subjective than Basevi would admit.

But even setting aside its debatable assumptions and sour grapes—and who, after all, fails to bring baggage along for the ride—Basevi's narrative can rightly be faulted for its unevenness, a by-product of his earnestness, curmudgeonly ego, and unwieldy game plan. His self-investiture as arbiter of operatic taste, combined with his contradictory impulses toward being evenhanded and proving Verdi unoriginal (the latter conflicting with his insistence that “the only music to suffer from the caprice of fashion is that whose worth derives from novelty and not from truth,” pp. 141–42), constrained him to address each and every scene in the process of tallying Verdi's score. An enormous task, it allowed only brief consideration of most pieces. Thus, Basevi's commentary often amounts to a checklist of pluses and minuses, in which musical phrases, movements, scenes, and entire operas are judged and sometimes casually dismissed with little or no explanation. In Act IV of *Nabucco*, “the funeral march is of little importance, as are Fenena's prayer and the hymn” (p. 24), the last, significantly, “Immenso Jeovha,” the chorus encored at the premiere. *Alzira*, an “unfortunate opera” suffering from “congenital paralysis,” receives a scant page and a half on its music (pp. 78–79). Basevi can no doubt be generous: Francesco's aria-finale in *I due Foscari* “reveal[s Verdi's] consummate genius in all its power” (p. 68). And at times he shows heartfelt concern for a talented composer not reaching his potential, for example when he scolds Verdi for imitating himself in *Il corsaro* like a “false artist” instead of writing from inspiration (pp. 119–22). Yet Basevi's underlying agenda leads just as often to grudging praise, backhanded compliments, ignored innovations, and a welter of sometimes legitimate, but often superfluous, comparisons to other composers and cross references to other operas aimed largely at putting Verdi in his place and at bolstering his own claims to literacy and critical authority.

And there remains the issue of historical relevance and meaning. Since Basevi took pains to distance himself from everyone else and claimed to be anything but representative of his times, we might ask if his observations and all the terms, conventions, and attitudes he advances authentically reflect audience expectations and contemporary discourse and usages, or if they merely provide a list of ready labels that lend historical verisimilitude to modern analyses, as Parker suggests. Absent corroboration by other writers, we can no more than guess.⁷

Considering these drawbacks, not to mention the frustrating amount of silt the modern reader must pan for nuggets of enlightenment, does the *Studio* really need to reach a broader audience through Schneider and Castelvechi's superlative new edition? The answer must be an unequivocal yes, for the Basevian stream sparkles with color. As Castelvechi, Rosenberg, and even Parker have allowed, Basevi's strengths, especially measured against those of his Italian contemporaries, are nothing to sneer at. His analytical reach is extraordinary by any standard and far exceeds his limited contributions to scene form. His intellectual and cultural literacy and his extensive knowledge of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century repertory of Italian and French opera inform his historical and stylistic contextualization of Verdi's works. And he at least professes a commitment to substantiating

⁷ Ritorni provides one example of such corroboration, as his far more thorough exposition of Bellinian scene structures verifies certain of Basevi's formal assumptions. Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti*, pp. 40–58, and Scott L. Balthazar, “Ritorni's *Ammaestramenti* and the Conventions of Rossinian Melodramma,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 8 (1989): 281–311.

value judgments with tangible musical and textual evidence. His scene-by-scene descriptions, which anticipated Julian Budden's work by more than a century, include numerous analytic innovations.⁸ Basevi identified the lyric prototype (p. 31); *forma variata* (contrasting solos in duets and other ensembles, though without tracing the practice back to Donizetti, p. 66); various types of *parlante*, including *parlante misto* and *parlante di ripieno* (pp. 210–11); and a Verdian family of duets *a mezza voce* (p. 216). And he attempted a unique periodization of Verdi's career and offered insights into purportedly "Germanic" aspects of Verdi's style, ranging from melodic counter-accentuation (p. 55) and certain types of dance music (p. 97) to Verdian "vigor" or "vehemence" (e.g., the *grande slancio* phrases of his first "manner," p. 34), staccato rhythms (pp. 142–43), melodic ascents (p. 56), and decisive harmonic progressions.

Moreover, the *Studio* is consistently provocative—whether we agree with its author or not—in its discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of individual librettos, their artistic and ethical merit (see the extended critiques of the premises of *Rigoletto* and *La traviata*), their suitability for musical setting (regarding *Rigoletto*: it is "impossible to render deformity appealing or to find music suited to material that we find utterly revolting," p. 173), and their success or failure in adapting their sources (the duet for Federica and Rodolfo in *Luisa Miller*, Act I, "perhaps the finest [scene] in Schiller's tragedy, comes off coldly in Cammarano's libretto [. . .] because the librettist has made Federica virtuous, such that Rodolfo's rejection of her hand has no motivation other than his love for Luisa," p. 144). In scenes that he regards as important (perhaps because they offer high-profile targets), Basevi gives cogent appraisals of Verdi's music in terms of its dramatic appropriateness and other criteria of value (uniformity vs. variety, formal novelty in the way it strings phrases and melodies together, etc.). A superb example is his extended discussion of the Act III quartet from *Rigoletto*, where, in part, he notes that Gilda's "broken vocal line" is "most apt for depicting the agitation produced by intense grief" and is "more fitting" and "produces a stronger effect" than an analogous passage from *Stiffelio* "because of its better accentuation, and because the breaks are almost always between notes [. . .] linked by their mutual attraction" (pp. 171–72). Alongside his remarks on specific pieces, Basevi's sometimes maligned excursions into a multitude of issues—generally one per opera, often a page or more in length, and frequently amplified elsewhere in his narrative—can be fascinating, and they often amount to the best of what he offers. Although a number of them depend on questionable assumptions and cry out for empirical verification, they anticipate various aspects of modern analysis and point in manifold directions toward future study.⁹ Since the editor has not indexed these sidebars, Figure 1 (p. 112 overleaf)—which lists Basevi's topics, the operas that provide points of entry, and their page numbers in the translation—is offered as a handy reference and as evidence of his analytical breadth. In short, the *Studio*'s limited

⁸ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1973–81).

⁹ Several studies have taken the *Studio* and Basevi's other writings as points of departure. See, for example, David Rosen, "Meter, Character, and *Tinta* in Verdi's Operas," in *Verdi's Middle Period* (cit. in n1 above), pp. 339–92; Harold S. Powers, "Basevi, Conati, and *La traviata*: The Uses of Convention," and Giorgio Sanguinetti, "La vera analisi delle melodie": La teoria 'meloarmonica' di Abramo Basevi," both in *Una piacevole estate di San Martino': Studi e ricerche per i settant'anni di Marcello Conati*, ed. Marco Capra (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2000), pp. 215–35 and 261–85, respectively; and Alessandro Roccatagliati, "Le forme dell'opera ottocentesca: Il caso Basevi," in *Le parole della musica I: Studi sulla lingua della letteratura musicale in onore di Gianfranco Folena*, ed. Fiamma Nicolodi and Paolo Trovato (Florence: Olschki, 1994), pp. 311–34.

utility for validating modern analyses is scant reason to disregard it entirely. By alerting us to an array of stylistic vectors that have barely been engaged, it holds considerable value apart from its status as an eminent historical artifact.

Schneider and Castelvechi's exemplary translation, which reduces the investment necessary for English-language readers to appreciate Basevi's insights, will no doubt send researchers off in new directions, continue to broaden our understanding of Verdi's craft, and deepen our appreciation of the composer's accomplishments.

Figure 1. Basevi's Sidebars in the *Studio*

Topic	Opera	Pages
sacred <i>colorito</i> , distinction between majestic and devout	<i>Nabucco</i>	13–15
fugue and canon	<i>Nabucco</i>	19
contrast, preparation/anticipation, economy	<i>Nabucco</i>	20–22
<i>parlante</i>	<i>I Lombardi alla Prima crociata</i>	35–37
deviation of musical expression from the text for dramatic purposes	<i>Ernani</i>	49–50
melodic counter-accentuation	<i>Ernani</i>	55–56
dearth of Italian composers and state of music criticism	<i>I due Foscari</i>	57–60
meter	<i>I due Foscari, Il trovatore</i>	64, 177
distinction between the fantastic and the supernatural	<i>Giovanna d'Arco</i>	70–71
anticipation	<i>Attila</i>	86–88
conventional rhythms	<i>Macbeth, Rigoletto</i>	99, 163–66
<i>colorito</i> and dramatic coherence	<i>I masnadieri</i>	103–05
revisions, remakes, pastiches, adaptations, translations	<i>Jérusalem</i>	111–14
true versus false artists	<i>Il corsaro</i>	119–22
music history and European cultural development	<i>La battaglia di Legnano</i>	127–32
restoration, revolution, and Verdi's first two "manners"	<i>Luisa Miller</i>	137–39
staccato melodies	<i>Luisa Miller</i>	142–43
voice types and modern singing	<i>Stiffelio</i>	150–51
recitative	<i>Stiffelio, Simon Boccanegra</i>	151–53, 225–26
expressive analogy versus communication	<i>Stiffelio</i>	152
rhythmic uniformity	<i>Rigoletto</i>	163–66
contrast and analogy	<i>Rigoletto</i>	172
orchestration, neglect of	<i>Rigoletto</i>	174
melody and harmony, relationships between	<i>Il trovatore</i>	180–83
narration and music	<i>Il trovatore</i>	183–84
neo-epicureanism and immorality	<i>La traviata</i>	191–93
Verdi's third "manner" and <i>opéra comique</i>	<i>La traviata</i>	196–97
French poetry and Italian melody	<i>Les vêpres siciliennes</i>	208–09
Verdi's fourth "manner"	<i>Simon Boccanegra</i>	223–24
scene complexes and the future of opera	<i>Simon Boccanegra</i>	228–29
Germanic influences	<i>Simon Boccanegra</i>	234