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Review of Susan Rutherford's 'Verdi, Opera, Women'

*Verdi, Opera, Women*  
Susan Rutherford  
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

*Hilary Poriss*

With her first book, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), Susan Rutherford emerged as one of the most highly respected authorities on opera singers of the long nineteenth century. In that monograph, she presented an expansive study of the women whose blood, sweat, and tears were shed on the lyric stage, tracking their lives from early training to retirement and taking account of the trials and tribulations that they regularly encountered, regardless of whether their careers brought them into the realm of superstardom or left them languishing among the ranks of second-rate choristers. Her second book, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, is, quite simply, even better than the first, one of the most sophisticated and gratifying examinations of women and opera to appear in the literature today and a welcome addition for anyone interested in gender politics of nineteenth-century Italy.

As the title of the book suggests, Rutherford's starting point is the operatic output of Giuseppe Verdi, whose productivity spanned nearly sixty years from 1839 to 1893. These years bore witness to multiple political and cultural shifts in Italy, and Rutherford seeks to map these changes against the plots and events represented on the operatic stage. Specifically, her focus falls on Verdi's female characters, a motley crew who ran the gamut from woman warrior to lover, youthful bride to aging witch. Throughout each chapter, Rutherford initiates her arguments with insightful discussions of individual characters, drawing on original source materials and compelling musical analyses. Were the book to consist exclusively of these moments of exegesis, the contribution would be notable. But Rutherford's goals are loftier and the results more valuable, for the third term in the book's title, "Women," refers not only to the characters and singers who appeared on stage, but also to those who sat in the audience. Rutherford's main objects of inquiry, in other words, are the real women who lived during the second half of the nineteenth century and whose struggles and ideals were reflected in Verdi's fictional worlds. "In short," she states, "my book is about women (and men) watching women—or rather, representations of women enacted by live performers" (p. 2).

This dual focus generates fascinating discussions that swerve back and forth between fiction and reality. In each of the chapters, readers are reintroduced to familiar figures: characters such as Gilda, Azucena, Aida, as well as many of Verdi's most important singers such as Virginia Boccabadati, Jenny Lind, Giuditta Pasta, and others. The most revealing moments, moreover, occur when Rutherford familiarizes readers with a group of hitherto unknown (or at least less well-known) female spectators who consumed these operatic entertainments and whose reactions form the backbone of much of her research. Rutherford's technique of pivoting the narrative from stage to audience and back again is best described as novelistic, capable of evoking distant times and places in a picturesque manner.

One of the first examples occurs in the book's prologue where, amid an overview of operatic spectatorship during the long nineteenth century, Rutherford reproduces a pair of photographs taken in 1909 at Parma's Teatro Regio (earlier known as the Teatro Ducale).

The view presented is not of the stage, but rather of the audience, hundreds of miniscule figures whose individual features are barely perceptible, packed into boxes and onto the main floor. Rutherford narrows her lens over one person in the crowd, a single woman dressed completely in white and accompanied by an elderly female companion. Knowing nothing of this stranger's identity, Rutherford comments: "That single figure recalls another young woman dressed in white, whose record of her opera-going many decades earlier allows us to explore the idea of female spectator in more individual terms" (p. 17). What follows is a sweeping glance back at a character drawn directly from real life, Alexandrine d'Alopeus (1808–1848), whose tumultuous courtship with the son of an exiled French aristocrat played itself out among the loges of Naples's Teatro San Carlo in the early 1830s. Through d'Alopeus's recollections (drawn from a book edited by her sister-in-law), Rutherford presents a first-hand account of the ways in which women of nineteenth-century Italy interacted with and reacted to that which occurred on the operatic stage. This method of blending together the staged with the real animates the seven chapters that follow.

Each chapter is headed by a one-word title that pithily encapsulates the subject matter that follows ("War," "Prayer," "Romance," "Sexuality," "Marriage," "Death," and "Laughter"). Chapter 1, "War," charts out the large array of women who were stirred to action by the revolutions leading up to Italian unification. As she does throughout the book, Rutherford begins by elaborating on larger contextual issues, situating Verdi's operas within a complex of political factions and their competing interests. "In short," she explains, "the opera house had too many components with opposing needs and power-bases to function effectively as a coherent, dependable device for political subversion" (p. 33). Against this multifaceted backdrop, Rutherford identifies three types of warring women who appeared both on-stage and in real life: "*le ispiratrici*," those who inspired others to action; "*le salvatrici*," those who swept in to save the day on the brink of disaster; and "*le guerriere*," those who took up the sword themselves, killing their enemies, being killed in battle, or both. Her focus throughout this chapter falls primarily on Verdi's operas of the 1840s, a set of works whose female protagonists were engaged in warlike activities: Odabella (*Attila*) and Héléne (*Les vêpres siciliennes*) receive the most attention, while Abigaille (*Nabucco*), Giselda (*I Lombardi alla Prima crociata*), Elvira (*Ernani*), Giovanna (*Giovanna d'Arco*), and Amalia (*I masnadieri*) make significant appearances as well. This overview of female warriors concludes with the harrowing tale of two real-life combatants, the little-known singers Ernesta Galli of Cermina and Marie Conti of Florence, who were arrested at their apartment on charges of "insults to the emperor and shouting revolutionary slogans" (p. 65). Their punishment was brutal—forty and thirty lashes respectively—after which, Rutherford concludes, they dropped from public view, their operatic careers effectively over.

Rutherford opens her second chapter, "Prayer," with two seemingly contradictory observations. The first concerns the world of operatic fiction: almost all of Verdi's heroines offer prayers, either in the form of lengthy arias or brief exclamations (p. 67). The second involves the reality of the nineteenth-century Catholic Church, where women were not allowed to raise their voices in religious song. To observe a woman singing God's praises, in other words, one was compelled to attend the theater or concert hall. Following an overview of Verdi's own ambivalent relationship to Catholicism, Rutherford examines some of the most important prayers in his oeuvre including Giselda's "Ave Maria" (*I Lombardi alla Prima crociata*), Leonora's "Madre, pietosa Vergine" and "Pace, pace, mio Dio" (*La forza del destino*), and Desdemona's "Ave Maria," (*Otello*).

Chapter 3, "Romance," seeks to reconcile the fraught nature of romance for many nineteenth-century Italian women with the manner in which this sentiment was projected on the operatic stage. Rutherford sketches out a bleak picture of love during the *Ottocento*, noting that few women were permitted to choose their partners, entering instead into a "marriage trade" that favored familial gain and sacrificed young and inexperienced women to older, abusive husbands. Tensions that arose between real-life fathers who desired economically or politically beneficial unions and the daughters who had to bear the resulting burden are echoed in a handful of Verdi's works, most prominently in *Simon Boccanegra* and *La forza del destino*.

Chapters 4, "Sexuality," and 5, "Marriage," delve deeper into the varieties of oppression that Italian women were forced to negotiate throughout the nineteenth century, a time when, as Rutherford summarizes at the beginning of chapter 4, "women endured multiple pregnancies, contraception was crude, ineffective and discouraged (later forbidden) by Catholicism, sex education was virtually non-existent, hygiene practices were lacking, and where women were denied equal legal rights with men" (p. 112). The main issues tackled in this exploration of sexuality are rape (as depicted in *Rigoletto*) and prostitution (as witnessed in *La traviata*). In the fifth chapter's exploration of marriage, Rutherford begins by asking "[w]hat could Ottocento women expect from marriage?" (p. 143). While for some, the union could be liberating, offering them more freedom than they experienced in their family homes, for others, marriage resulted in the "destruction of dreams." Such was the case for the real-life women Mariannina Coffa Caruso and Enrichetta di Lorenzo, whose stories of marriage and separation Rutherford reconstructs. Against this backdrop, the chapter explores the contentious marriages of Lina (*Stiffelio*), Amelia (*Un ballo in maschera*), and Elisabeth (*Don Carlos*).

Chapter 6, "Death," situates the seeming overabundance of operatic deaths against the reality of the average lifespan of Italian women (a mere thirty-four years). "In such a context," Rutherford notes, "Ottocento opera's dwelling on the demise of its youthful heroines reads less like a deliberate massacre, and more as a means of coping with social trauma: a way of articulating grief and its attendant emotions" (p. 179). She then leads readers through a tour of the various ways in which Verdi's women, and their nineteenth-century counterparts, met their end: public and private deaths, happy endings (albeit delayed), death by disease, and simultaneous deaths by lovers. The final chapter, "Laughter," steps away from the blood, gore, and oppression of earlier chapters and concludes on a more optimistic note. Focusing primarily on Verdi's final opera, *Falstaff*, which is dominated by a quartet of independent women, Rutherford surveys the changing social and political landscape as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Although complete independence was a long way off for most women, the emergence of "la donna nuova" ("the new woman") left some room for hope.

*Verdi, Opera, Women* is an important addition to the literature surrounding Verdi's operas, examinations of opera and gender, and the broader subject of women's social and cultural position throughout the *Ottocento*. Rutherford's musical and textual analyses of Verdi's operas shed new, compelling light onto familiar works, and her examinations of women drawn directly from the time period are nothing short of riveting. As such, this book will prove invaluable to all readers with an interest in nineteenth-century Italian opera and the cultural context in which Verdi's works were written, produced, and consumed.