

# The bicentennial of Giuseppe Verdi

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October 10 is the 200th birth anniversary of the quintessential operatic genius Giuseppe Verdi, and the event is being marked all over the world. Verdi was born in Italy in 1813, near the town of Busseto, about 60 miles southeast of Milan. He died in 1901, at the age of 87, after a career that lasted nearly six decades and made him the most famous composer of opera of his day and perhaps of today as well.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this iconic figure. Opera—certainly Italian opera—cannot be spoken of without mentioning his name. There were other composers who produced more. In quantity at least, Verdi's 28 operas, for example, pale in comparison to the 75 composed by *bel canto* master Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848). Neither Donizetti nor anyone else, however, comes close in terms of the number and percentage of their works—nearly 20 in Verdi's case—that have remained staples of the global operatic repertory.

(Indeed, according to Operabase, Verdi is the most popular opera composer of the present day. Over the five most recent seasons, 28 of his operas, in 2,486 performances, were staged worldwide. The next most popular figure was Giacomo Puccini [1858-1924], with 1,893 performances of 12 operas.)

The commemorations of Verdi's bicentenary include the recent release of a 75-CD set of his complete operas on the Decca label, a four-day conference organized by the American Institute for Verdi Studies at New York University and the live Internet streaming on the evening of October 10 of a performance of Verdi's monumental *Requiem* by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under conductor and Verdi specialist Riccardo Muti. The New York Metropolitan Opera marked the bicentenary year last season, when it staged seven of the composer's most famous operas, including *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Don Carlo*, *Aida* and *Otello*.

Verdi showed early musical talent, but he was not a prodigy, and in fact was not admitted as a young man into the Milan conservatory. His early years were also marked by personal tragedy, as both his two infant children and his young wife died in quick succession between 1838 and 1840. The young composer did not achieve major success until his third opera, *Nabucco*, opened in 1842, when he was 28 years old.

By the time another decade or so had elapsed, however, with the appearance of *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata* in quick succession, Verdi was the most famous opera composer of the time, with the possible exception of Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864). Though he was born only four years after the death of Franz Joseph Haydn (born 1732), the father of the symphony and string quartet, Verdi had an impact that spanned most of the 19th century and beyond.

Verdi composed almost exclusively for the opera stage. His non-operatic compositions include the famous *Requiem* from 1873, one of the most "operatic" pieces of sacred music ever produced, in honor of poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni. Also from 1873 was Verdi's sole significant work of instrumental chamber music, the beautiful *String Quartet*.

The bicentenary of Verdi cannot be noted without comparison to the other 19th century opera genius born in 1813. Richard Wagner (died 1883) is often portrayed as the great rival of Johannes Brahms

(1833-1897), but the contrast between Wagner and Verdi is more apt. The German composer was the inventor of an entirely new school of music drama, the "Gesamtkunstwerk," which found its highest expression in his massive Ring Cycle of four operas (composed over the course of some 26 years, 1848-74).

Compared to Wagner, Verdi was certainly a musical conservative. He was often criticized during his lifetime for what were considered overly popular or obvious methods and techniques. He was unquestionably a man deeply embedded in his time, a composer who strove mightily to connect to his audience, to use existing popular forms. But Verdi's times were also revolutionary times, and he powerfully embodied the immense social and cultural changes of this period.

It is true that Verdi very much began in the *bel canto* tradition, associated most closely with Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) and Donizetti in the first few decades of the 19th century. The basic musical structures, the set-piece arias and ensembles, the use of choruses are there. Verdi's early operas in particular owe an understandable debt to his immediate predecessors.

However, Verdi also transformed the *bel canto* tradition. Even from the outset, his operas are distinguished by a greater naturalism, passion and weight, aiming less at beauty of tone (*bel canto*="beautiful singing") and more at singing and technique that arise organically out of and serve the dramatic action itself.

In contrast to earlier composers, for instance, Verdi created unglamorous or unromantic protagonists, including the gypsy Azucena (*Il Trovatore*) and the hunchbacked jester Rigoletto. *La Traviata* (in literal English translation, "The Woman Who Strayed"), about a courtesan, was attacked on moral grounds when it first appeared. Likewise, according to Harold Schonberg's *Lives of the Great Composers*, legal action was brought against the showing of *Rigoletto* in New York in 1855, on the grounds that "by its singing, its business, and its plot, was then and there such an exhibition of opera as no respectable member of the fair sex could patronize without then and there sacrificing both taste and modesty."

The dramatic force of Verdi's operas grew as he gained confidence and experience. The works of his maturity are characterized by a rhythmic excitement and complexity combined with an unmatched gift for melody. Verdi's use of choruses and ensembles are also extraordinary. Together with his naturalism and dramatic power came a new psychological depth and complexity.

Throwing himself with enormous energy into every new project, Verdi's operatic career, spanning the 54 years between his first opera, *Oberto*, in 1839, and his last, *Falstaff*, in 1893, was one of almost continuous development and even reinvention. The operas can be very loosely grouped into four periods: the early operas, including *Nabucco*, *I Lombardi*, *Ernani* and *Macbeth*; the three enormous successes already mentioned from the early 1850s; the famous operas of Verdi's maturity, including *Simon Boccanegra*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *La Forza del Destino*, *Don Carlo* and *Aida*; and the operas of Verdi's old age, *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

These 14 masterpieces by no means exhaust Verdi's work, however. Another half-dozen or so less well-known operas by Verdi are regularly

staged in one corner of the globe or another. When the Metropolitan Opera presented *Attila*, composed in 1846, and *Stiffelio*, from 1850, in recent years, they were a musical revelation to the opera enthusiast who had not heard them before.

Another criticism of the composer, one that continues to this day, focuses on the undoubted weakness of some of his libretti. *Il Trovatore* is often brought forward as the prime example of an opera riddled with improbabilities and inconsistencies. And it is true that some of Verdi's works illustrate the reality that expressive music, after all, is the central ingredient of opera.

At the same time, it would be a gross injustice to overlook the fact that half a dozen Verdi masterpieces are based on classic literature. *Macbeth*, *Otello* and *Falstaff* are of course adapted from William Shakespeare. *Ernani* is based on Victor Hugo's play *Hernani* and *Rigoletto* on *Le roi s'amuse*, another play by Hugo, the famous French dramatist, republican, and leading figure of the Enlightenment who went into exile in opposition to the regime of Napoleon III. *La Traviata* is based on *The Lady of the Camellias*, by Alexandre Dumas fils. And *Don Carlo*, the opera considered by many to have been Verdi's greatest, and perhaps the greatest opera of all, is based on the play of the same name by Friedrich Schiller, one of the towering geniuses of the German Enlightenment.

Verdi's interest in the work of Schiller, Dumas and Hugo reveals the extent to which he was influenced by the political and social struggles of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the decades that followed the French Revolution and its promise of liberty, fraternity and equality. It is necessary to note, in this regard, Verdi's own atheism. Some historians claim agnosticism, but there is in any case plenty of evidence for Verdi's hatred of organized religion.

The composer lived openly with Giuseppina Strepponi, a soprano who had sung in some of his works, for more than a decade before they finally married in 1859. In 1851 the composer wrote a letter to his former father-in-law and music teacher, declaring angrily, "In my house lives a lady, free and independent, and possessed of a fortune that places her beyond reach of need, who shares my love of seclusion. Neither she nor I need render account of our actions to any man ... My nature shrieks against submitting to the prejudices of other people."

There is also the crucial relationship between Verdi and the *Risorgimento* ("resurgence," in Italian), the movement of national unification directed against the Austrian occupation of much of Italy's territory. Whatever Verdi's specific political motives, the famous Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves in *Nabucco* ("Va, pensiero") touched a chord with Italian listeners who opposed the occupation. After Verdi had become the most famous Italian composer—virtually the only active Italian composer of note in the 1850s and 60s—he served briefly as a member in the Chamber of Deputies.

In 1874, in obvious recognition of Verdi's prestige and celebrity, he was named Senator by King Victor Emmanuel. In his last decades the composer, although not politically active, was often associated with the great names of Italian nationalism, including Cavour and Garibaldi. A state-organized funeral in February 1901, about a month after his death, attracted more than 300,000 people, the largest crowds ever seen on the streets of Milan. Arturo Toscanini, who as a young man worked with Verdi and went on to become the leading conductor of Italian opera of the first half of the 20th century, led massive combined orchestras and choirs at this funeral service, including in a rendition of "Va, pensiero."

One of the more well-known examples of Verdi's broader historical impact, and his association with the *Risorgimento*, can be seen in *Senso*, the great Italian film of 1954 by Luchino Visconti, set in Venice in 1866 against the backdrop of the fight against Austrian occupation. The film opens with a scene from *Il Trovatore*, filmed on location inside Venice's famous La Fenice opera house, which becomes the occasion for an altercation between Italian nationalists and Austrian troops.

While some of Verdi's greatest arias and choruses are known to many millions who have never set foot inside an opera house ("Va, pensiero" from *Nabucco*, "The Anvil Chorus" from *Il Trovatore*, "La donna e mobile" from *Rigoletto*, "The Drinking Song" from *La Traviata*), other arias and ensembles are no less important in arriving at a deeper appreciation of his greatness.

Among these, for instance, are the numerous extended duets for father and daughter figures in some of Verdi's most famous operas. Time and again the focus is placed, not only or even primarily on the love duets typical of Puccini and other composers, but on broader social issues and the tragic difficulties and dilemmas facing families and individuals in conflict with society or official morals. Examples of this psychological complexity abound in Verdi, as in the duets between Nabucco and Abigail, Rigoletto and Gilda, Germont and Violetta in *La Traviata*, and Amonasro and Aida.

The greater emphasis given to baritone and bass roles in Verdi's work also reflects an interest in setting the typical romantic conflicts within a broader historical context. This is nowhere more powerfully expressed than in *Don Carlo*, based on Schiller's play (1783-87) set in 16th century Spain, with its moving themes of freedom, justice and the fight against foreign oppression (see "Schiller's Don Carlos: the light and warmth of a timeless play," 12 November 2004).

*Don Carlo*, originally set to a French libretto and produced for the Paris Opera, is now most often performed in Italian. The longest and most-revised of Verdi's works, it also rewards careful listening. There are an almost endless list of musical examples, but King Philip's tragic aria opening Act IV, "Ella giammai m'amo" ("She never loved me") stands out, as well as the dying aria of Rodrigo, the friend of Philip's heir Don Carlo, "Io morro, ma lieto in coro" and the glorious Act II duet for tenor and baritone, "Dio che nell' alma infondere."

Verdi lived largely in musical retirement for much of the 1870s and 1880s, but was lured back to work by the composer and dramatist Arrigo Boito (1842-1918). Boito, whose one opera *Mefistofele* deserves to be revived far more often, brought the old master out of retirement for two projects based on Shakespeare. *Otello* appeared in 1887, when Verdi was 74, and *Falstaff* six years later.

Both of these works, appearing between 15 and 20 years after *Aida*, represent a shift—especially *Falstaff*. *Otello* is through-composed. At this point, in light of the development of music drama that Wagner had made in the previous decades, Verdi himself began to use techniques that owed something to the *leitmotif* pioneered by the German master. *Otello* has less dramatic action than the earlier operas, and fewer of the arias and ensembles that characterized much of the Verdi repertory up to that time, but it is enormously powerful and very recognizably the work of the artist who composed *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*.

*Falstaff* is different, a kind of operatic coda for Verdi, although he would live another eight years after completing it. Here Verdi turned back to comedy for only the second time in his career. Based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as well as the two parts of *Henry IV*, this opera uses little of the developed melody and grand arias for which Verdi was so well known. Instead there is wit and masterful counterpoint. The opera ends in an extraordinary fugue.

Verdi's legacy and influence deservedly remain immense. One recent survey indicates that seven of the 25 most-performed works in recent decades were composed by Verdi. Aside from the great musical and dramatic pleasure that many millions derive from listening to his works, the impact of his naturalism on later opera must also be noted. The works of such diverse composers as Puccini, Alban Berg, Benjamin Britten and Francis Poulenc owe much to the innovations and dramatic realism fought for by Verdi.



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