

BOOK REVIEWS

Two Companions to Italian Opera

Emanuele Senici, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). xv + 264pp. \$75. Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, index

Scott L. Balthazar, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). xxvi + 336pp. \$75. Music examples, bibliography, index

For several years the Cambridge Companions to Music series (henceforth CCM) has published compact, informative books exploring individual composers, instruments, and aspects of Western music traditions. The series made its debut in the early 1990s, and at this stage consists of over thirty volumes, providing many categories of readers with readily available and accessible sources of information on a range of topics, from 'the recorder' to 'pop and rock', from Mozart to John Cage. It is indeed a source of satisfaction for Italian opera enthusiasts to find two of their favourite composers, Gioachino Rossini and Giuseppe Verdi, at last canonized in the series, and figuring with pride next to Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy and Berg. The admittance of Rossini and Verdi into the CCM sanctum is proof not only of their privileged status among opera aficionados, but also of the scholarly interest and efforts that for a few decades have contributed substantially to the reassessment of the two composers and their work. The contents of the two volumes make that clear. Both offer far more than an overview of the lives, milieux and works of Rossini and Verdi, showcasing a number of methodologies and areas of inquiry, including reception, politics, librettos, compositional process, sources, textual criticism, performance practices and research trends.

Rather than taking the single-author approach (as does, for example, the 'rival' Master Musicians series), the CCM consist of edited volumes containing commissioned essays by a range of contributors. It is in this conception that lie some of the greatest strengths – and at the same time some significant weaknesses – of the series as a whole, and of the volumes here under consideration. On one hand (the positive one), the two editors (Emanuele Senici for the *Cambridge Companion to Rossini* [henceforth CCR] and Scott L. Balthazar for the *Cambridge Companion to Verdi* [henceforth CCV]) have assembled two impressive teams of contributors. Each volume features not only authors of Anglo-American extraction, but also important scholars from Italy and (in the case of CCR) France. Making substantial essays by Paolo Fabbri, Marco Beghelli, Alessandro Roccatagliati, Fabrizio Della Seta and Damien Colas available in English is certainly a considerable asset of the two companions. And each volume features some of the leading authorities in the two, often overlapping fields of Rossini and Verdi studies, while also introducing members of a younger generation of scholars of Italian opera. On the other hand (and here we turn to the negatives), there is in both volumes a wide variety in the quantity and quality of the information and approaches, ranging from broad and generalizing chapters that may prove useful to the neophyte but offer little of interest for the more informed reader to essays that

present discussions of specific aspects or interpretive ideas without providing an adequate context to orient the inexperienced reader.

This is particularly troublesome if we consider that the Cambridge Companions to Music (as the Press's website recites) are 'written with the student, the performer and the music lover in mind'. In my experience as a teacher, I have already noticed that the series is one of the first resources encountered and used by undergraduate students as they work on term papers and other research projects. And in his preface to the CCV, Scott Balthazar seems to show some discomfort with the Press's statement of purpose, as he sees it fit to specify that the book, 'like other volumes in the series, is aimed primarily at students and opera lovers *who already have a broad background in music history and theory but have not proceeded to a specialized level*' (p. xiii; the emphasis is mine). This narrows down the intended readership considerably, to a middleground that will almost inevitably perceive some of the contents as nearly superfluous ('I already knew this!' – 'I've read this elsewhere'), and others as exceedingly specialized ('This is all well and good, but I don't feel it helps me get started on this composer's life, this opera's significance, or this important cultural phenomenon'). Again Balthazar reminds us that each chapter in the CCV 'constitutes a free-standing article', and his claim that the volume 'has been designed to create a readably intensive, integrated overview of Verdi's oeuvre' (p. xiii) is only partially supported by the overall organization of the volume and the contents of the essays it contains. And although Emanuele Senici makes no similar claims in his introduction to the CCR, the latter also suffers from similar problems. Both editors have worked with a light touch, respecting (as they should) the individual personalities and interests of their authors, but also (as much as can be inferred from the finished product) allowing at times excessive leeway at the planning stage.

Not surprisingly, there are similarities in the overall structure of the two volumes. Each consists of four parts, the first exploring biography and context (and, in the CCR, reception), the second turning to broad issues concerning the work of the two composers, the third concentrating on 'representative operas', and the last devoted to 'performance' in the CCR and to 'creation and critical reception' in the CCV.

Let us begin with the biographical and contextual essays. In the CCR, an informative and engaging opening chapter by Richard Osborne accompanies the reader through the various phases of Rossini's long life, offering concise but insightful glimpses into works discussed throughout the volume. This is followed by two chapters that explore the reception of the composer in his own time and today. Benjamin Walton's 'Rossini and France' is a discussion of the reception of Rossini in France at various stages of his life and afterwards, taking the lead from the disinterment and removal to Italy of Rossini's remains in 1887. In spite of some commonplace statements (for example, a reference to the composer's 'voluntary abdication after *Guillaume Tell*' [p. 27]), and numerous passing references to themes that are never properly investigated ('political liberty, sexual potency, amorality, the thrill of battle' [p. 27]), the chapter is stimulating, and leaves the reader wanting for another, parallel discussion of 'Rossini in Italy', which could have enriched the volume with an examination of the wealth of nineteenth-century critical sources on the composer. Part I of the CCR concludes with Charles S. Brauner's 'The Rossini Renaissance', which examines the re-discovery and re-assessment of much of Rossini's music on the critical front and in performance during the course of the twentieth century. Senici's choice to place this chapter so early in the volume is an excellent one,

as the diligent reader who is perusing the book cover-to-cover becomes aware of the historical foundations for a great deal of interest and research around the composer, without which the work presented in the rest of the book would not have existed.

The CCV begins with a schematic chronology (for which no author is indicated), followed by Mary Jane Phillips-Matz's 'Verdi's Life: A Thematic Biography'. Author of a monumental (albeit controversial) study of Verdi's life,¹ here Phillips-Matz uses each phase of the composer's biography to discuss specific relevant themes (early education, the opera trade in Milan, singers and librettists, political ramifications, and others). The narration is filled with charming anecdotes, and provides a good deal of reliable and useful information, but the chapter as a whole seems nonetheless to miss its target, as the author probably tried to accomplish too much in the short space at her disposal. In most extant discussions of Verdi's life and career, biographical details are seen as closely intertwined with the opera business (which is obvious and necessary), and with the political backdrop of the Risorgimento. Alessandro Roccatagliati, whose writings deserve to circulate far more broadly in the English-speaking world, offers an accessible and yet detailed discussion of 'The Italian Theatre of Verdi's Day', emphasizing the important changes in the balance between impresarios and publishers in the nineteenth-century opera business, and examining the implications for the increasing stability of the operatic 'text'. In the chapter that follows ('Verdi, Italian Romanticism, and the Risorgimento'), Mary Ann Smart addresses the 'vexed topic' (p. 29) of Verdi's involvement in the intellectual movement for the liberation and unification of Italy. The subject is vexed indeed, and has become the area for a heated debate following Roger Parker's 1997 study of the Verdian chorus in the 1840s. Relying largely on journalistic evidence, Parker questioned the validity of numerous assumptions concerning the political meaning and reception of Verdi's choruses in the pre-1848 phase of the Risorgimento, demonstrating that myths surrounding the composer's personal involvement in the Italian national cause and the iconic status of 'Va pensiero' from *Nabucco* were constructed *post facto*. His broad conclusion is that Verdi's pre-1848 choruses had little, if any, political significance or impact.² Smart embraces Parker's position, and spends several pages summarizing (instead of investigating) his argument, including a discussion of the reception of 'Va pensiero', and a detailed examination and long example from a 'Canto degli italiani' by Pietro Cornali (originally published by Ricordi in 1848). Following the publication of the CCV, George Martin and Philip Gossett have cogently refuted some of Parker's conclusions, suggesting that it is essential to look beyond 'Va pensiero' to other works by Verdi, and also beyond Verdi, to develop a thorough and nuanced perception of the political ramifications of Risorgimento opera and its choruses.³ As a result, at this stage several statements in the first half of Smart's essay may require further discussion,

¹ *Verdi: A Biography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

² Roger Parker, "'Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati": The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s' (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 1997). A shorter version of this study appears as "'Va Pensiero and the Insidious Mastery of Song," in *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 20-41.

³ Philip Gossett, 'Le "edizioni distrutte" e il significato dei cori operistici nel Risorgimento', *Saggiatore musicale* 12 (2005): 339-87, English trans., "'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 F. Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Another critique

and in some cases thorough revision (for example, 'in the 1840s Verdi's operas neither alarmed the Austrians much nor focused popular patriotic feeling as usually thought' [p. 37]). And I find it surprising that she (and the book as a whole) neglects to consider the political ramifications of censorship during the Risorgimento. The conclusive part of Smart's study is more stimulating, as she concentrates on the Mazzinian aspects of *La battaglia di Legnano*, and particularly on the use of its female protagonist as an allegory of nation. This is one type of investigation that needs to be pursued and extended to other operas – not only those by Verdi, and not only those intended as celebrations of 1848. In this light, the fact that the CCR omits to consider the political themes and reception of Rossini's operas constitutes a missed opportunity.

The second part of both companions concentrates on significant aspects of the two composers' creative output, examined in chapters devoted to literary and musical conventions, melodic style, compositional process, influence and coherence, and non-operatic works. It is here that both volumes are truer to their mission, and on the whole provide collections of papers that are well structured, thoroughly documented, highly informative, and that in many cases succeed in the difficult endeavour of combining accessibility for the novice and stimulating materials and approaches for the experienced scholar. Paolo Fabbri's and Fabrizio Della Seta's respective studies of Rossini's and Verdi's libretti and librettists contain a wealth of information, and, read together, they effectively trace the evolution not only of the libretto as the bearer of structural conventions and poetic content, but also of the relationship between composer and librettist. For Rossini, the ability to reject a libretto as early as 1812 or to treat a librettist (Angelo Anelli) 'as an equal' in 1815 were signs of his rising prestige and power in the operatic establishment. What comes across in Della Seta's discussion of Verdi is the radical involvement of the mature composer in every aspect and phase of the creation of the libretto, which in many cases leads to question the status of the poet as 'author'. Philip Gossett's study of Rossini's compositional methods is one of the most authoritative chapters in the two volumes, and passionately argues (presenting an abundance of compelling primary evidence) for the understanding of the creative process as an essential aspect of the composer's artistic engagement throughout his life and of his historical significance. The portion of the essay that deals with the composer's late works is particularly revealing, as it demonstrates not only Rossini's artistry, but also his ability to adapt compositional methods to circumstances. In the CCV, Luke Jensen's 'Introduction to Verdi's Working Methods' is placed in the closing section of the volume, but provides a good complement to Gossett's study. I wish that the recent impressive development in the study of Verdi's sketches had found greater reflection in this volume, but Jensen does a fine job at raising numerous important issues in the short space at his disposal, and the references he provides are of great help for those who wish to know more.

The complex issue of musical dramaturgy, and the multi-layered relationship between structural and dramatic elements in Rossini's and Verdi's operas is the subject of several essays in the two volumes. In the CCR, the two aspects are examined jointly in Marco Beghelli's 'The Dramaturgy of the Operas', which aptly poses and addresses a fundamental question relevant not only for Rossini, but for all *ottocento* opera: to what extent are the works of Rossini 'the largely

of Parker's approach is George Martin's 'Verdi, Politics, and "Va, pensiero": The Scholars Squabble', *The Opera Quarterly* 21 (2005): 109-32.

predictable results of contemporary artistic convention'? One aspect that would require further discussion is the use of the term 'stretta' (instead of the common 'cabaletta') to label the closing, usually fast, section of a multi-movement aria (p. 94). What Beghelli seems to suggest (but could have articulated in greater detail) is that the formal analogy between the latter and the closing movement of ensemble numbers – for which the term 'stretta' was indeed used by the composers themselves – calls for a uniform definition. In his view, the 'cabaletta' proper is 'a well-defined shape: a melodic period, complete in itself ... repeated with the same text' (p. 94) – a definition that, one infers, can be applied to solo or duet closing movements (cabalettas) as well as to ensemble closing movements (strettas). Another issue, which is also present in numerous other discussions of formal convention in nineteenth-century Italian opera (beginning with Harold Power's seminal 'Solita forma' article),⁴ is the term 'tempo d'attacco', used by Beghelli – as well as by Balthazar in his CCV chapter 'The Form of Set Pieces' – to describe the opening section that precedes the *cantabile* or *pezzo concertato* of a number. This expression is drawn not from Rossini's (or Verdi's) own terminology, but from an oft-quoted passage in Abramo Basevi's 1859 *Studio delle opere di Giuseppe Verdi*. The term 'primo tempo', however, which Beghelli uses as an equivalent of 'tempo d'attacco', is often used in correspondence by Rossini, Verdi and other *ottocento* composers, and may therefore be preferable, especially referring to Rossini's formal procedures. The question of whether Basevi's expression 'tempo d'attacco' defines just any opening movement, or rather only certain types of opening movements, also deserves to be addressed.

Following Balthazar's effective (if somewhat normative) discussion of formal conventions, the CCV is enriched by four additional articles that examine, from various perspectives, Verdi's approach to text setting, structural matters and instrumental music in his operas. Here one finds some of the most successful contributions to the volume, beginning with Emanuele Senici's engaging 'Words and music', which examines matters of prosody, poetic structures and text painting, as well as the concept of 'parola scenica' (theatrical word) and its implications in Verdian dramaturgy. In his thoroughly researched and clearly presented 'French Influences', Andreas Giger goes a long way towards tracing the multi-layered aspects of Verdi's relation to French culture and operatic practice, concentrating in detail on forms, chorus and ballet music, orchestration and accompanimental procedures, and melodic style. The following chapter, Steven Huebner's 'Structural Coherence,' offers a solid survey and critique of a number of analytical studies concentrating on tonal procedures, key association and large-scale organization in Verdi's operas. This is a complex field, in which scholars have wandered between the quest for coherence as a way of legitimizing the status of Verdi's work (and more generally nineteenth-century Italian opera) as 'good music', and the belief that large-scale tonal organization (to use Julian Budden's words) 'was no part of Verdi's thinking' (p. 141). In the concluding part of his study, Huebner argues that 'rather than dismiss reductionist statements and the subordination of details to paradigms, we would do well to recognize that paradigms reflect analytical purposes, and that reduction and subordination occur at one level or another in all analysis' (p. 153). Following this important chapter, David Kimbell discusses 'Instrumental Music in Verdi's Operas', which explores not only *sinfonie* and preludes, but also ballet music, storms, various

⁴ "'La solita forma" and the Uses of Convention', *Acta Musicologica* 59 (1987): 65–90.

types of stage music, and other significant roles of the orchestra, for example in the often neglected *parlante* episodes.

In the CCR, after Beghelli's study of the dramaturgy, the discussion turns to Rossini's 'Melody and Ornamentation'. In this chapter, Damien Colas offers an enlightening discussion of the aesthetic premises of Rossini's melodic art, and then launches into a detailed analysis of the structural features of the composer's lines, and the construction of recitative and dialogue sections, open and closed melodic textures, and patterns of ornamentation. In both volumes, Part 2 concludes with informative chapters on the non-operatic compositions by Rossini (Richard Osborne) and Verdi (Roberta Montemorra Marvin). Both authors present a wealth of information related to the often-overlooked production of songs and chamber music, and both concentrate on the large-scale choral works (Rossini's *Stabat Mater* and *Petite Messe Solennelle* and Verdi's *Messa di Requiem*).

Having provided the reader with broad discussions of stylistic matters, the two volumes turn to individual works. The step is a logical one, as the keen reader, equipped with the information and tools acquired in Part 2, can now approach each opera with an increased awareness of its historical and stylistic context. For each composer four operas are considered, spanning the entire career of both – from *Tancredi* (1813) to *Guillaume Tell* (1829) for Rossini, and from *Ernani* (1844) to *Otello* (1887) for Verdi. Including also discussions of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1816), *Semiramide* (1823), *Rigoletto* (1851), and *Don Carlos* (1867), considered collectively the essays survey some of the most relevant and popular Italian operas of the nineteenth century. More than in the section on style, a broad range of scholarly methods and aims is represented here, from close examination of literary sources to 'new musicological' approaches. Let us begin with the latter. Both Heather Hadlock (in a chapter on *Tancredi* and *Semiramide*) and Rosa Solinas (in an essay on *Ernani*) concentrate on the practice of assigning leading male roles to female singers, which informs the vocal types of numerous serious works by Rossini, and declined steadily during the 1820s and 1830s. Focusing on the title role in *Tancredi* and the role of Arsace in *Semiramide*, both conceived for *en travesti* prima donnas, Hadlock observes that by the time of composition of *Semiramide*, the conventional arrangement of vocal types encountered in *Tancredi* (with a soprano–alto pair of lovers, a villainous bass, and a fatherly tenor) was becoming increasingly problematic, as Rossini invested 'the traditional forms found in *Tancredi* ... with a musical language in every way more elaborate, and with new psychological and dramatic content' (p. 146). The chapter is supported by a discussion of the 'gendered qualities' of the principal characters. Some of Hadlock's ideas are very personal, and may gain further strength if tested against more substantial contemporary evidence. The tangential argument that 'Assur ... is unambiguously masculine', for example, seems problematic when one considers his mad scene. But her central case for an Arsace who, compared to Tancredi, is 'less angelic, less idealised' (p. 155), and therefore in a way emblematic of the increasingly widespread discomfort with the practice of casting women singers in male parts, yields a believable context for the rapid decline of the *travesti* convention during the 1820s. It is unfortunate that Rossini's own experiences with different casting solutions in several of his Neapolitan operas (for example in *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*, *Otello* and *Ermione*) receive little attention in this essay or elsewhere in the CCR. By the outset of Verdi's career in 1839, the practice of creating lead roles to be performed *en travesti* was all but obsolete. Nonetheless, in the case of *Ernani* the young composer, eager to obtain his first engagement from Venice's Teatro

La Fenice, came close to writing the title role for renowned contralto Carolina Vietti. He was strongly opposed to the idea, however, and at an early stage of negotiation he obtained to cast a tenor instead of a prima donna in the part of Ernani. For Rosa Solinas, in this opera 'uncertainty regarding Ernani's gender identity is immediately evident' (p. 194), revealed by the fact that the 'tenor in crisis' often refers to himself in the third person, and in the 'passaggio' between middle and high registers. These are indeed significant traits of this character, and may offer significant insights into him, into *Ernani* (the opera) as a whole, or into even broader matters and contexts. But the argument that 'bearing in mind the compositional history, the irresistible conclusion is that he is not a "real" tenor' (p. 195) is implausible. The uniqueness of this character (and countless others, male and female) could indeed be interpreted in numerous other ways, and the reference to 'compositional history' is misleading, since none of the score had been composed before the casting was changed, and there is no evidence or indication that Verdi or his librettist ever wished or seriously considered writing for a *travesti* protagonist.

From the *seria* masterworks, the CCR turns to the perennial *Barbiere di Siviglia*, with Janet Johnson's discussion of the opera's genre. Here Johnson surveys the rich tradition of comedy that informs Sterbini's libretto and Rossini's music, and offers a perceptive reading of the score in the light of its complex cultural background and imagery. This is an essay that bears multiple readings, and that offers not only a good introduction to Rossini's *buffa* masterpiece, but also thought-provoking insights into the world of comic opera. Johnson's chapter is followed by Cormac Newark's essay on *Guillaume Tell*, which concentrates on the reception, the origins of the libretto, and the musical dramaturgy. The discussion of the latter (which also refers frequently to issues of reception) is rather concise, and leaves several open questions in regard to the opera's formal procedures and their relation to Rossini's background on one hand and to the rising tradition of *grand opéra* on the other.

In the CCV, again Cormac Newark undertakes the perilous task of examining one of most popular operas in the canon. His chapter on *Rigoletto* rightly emphasizes the central position of this opera in the context of Verdi's *oeuvre*, and then poses the question of 'what ... makes it such a success' (p. 198). The investigation begins with musical structure (with a survey of reductionist analytical studies of the opera) and continues with a discussion of the genesis of the work. For Newark, the troubled interaction with the censors, who radically altered the original conception of the work, is viewed as one of the elements that caused the opera to focus on the curse motive – at both the textual and musical level. The discussion of the 'novelty' of the opera is broad, and touches among other things on 'self-propagating commentary' (p. 203), *Rigoletto's* atypical vocal and dramatic status as 'hero', comparison of the opening scene with *Don Giovanni's* Act I finale, relationship with Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse*, and detailed examination of 'La donna è mobile'. Newark's desire to cover a great deal of ground results in an essay that reads pleasantly, but once again leaves some questions unanswered, and in one case – stating that 'in Act III... we meet an honorable assassin and an amorous prostitute' (p. 205) – misleads the reader who is not familiar with the opera (*Sparafucile* is first met, and seems indeed honorable, in Act I, whereas he turns out to be dishonorable in Act III).

The concluding two chapters on individual Verdi operas are by Harold Powers and Scott L. Balthazar. The former, provocatively titled '*Don Carlos: An Overview of the Operas*', is a detailed study of the complex patterns of

revision in the various versions of the opera (the pre-premiere interventions that occurred during 1866–67, and the even shorter version of 1882–83, prepared for Vienna and premiered in Milan in 1884). The more technical aspects of Powers' essay will make it unfriendly for those who are not conversant with this work (especially the French original), but the breadth of his investigation, the combination of attention to primary evidence and interpretive insight, and the welcome consideration of recordings (a subject that could have used extensive discussion in both companions) are magisterial. And Balthazar's study of *Otello* ('Desdemona's alienation and Otello's fall') brings this part of the CCV to an effective conclusion, with a consideration of melodic style and tonal organization aimed at contrasting the construction of the ill-fated pair of lovers in Shakespeare and in Boito-Verdi.

Following the section on individual operas, the CCV comes to a rapid close (in the best Verdian tradition), with Luke Jensen's study of working methods (mentioned above) and a perceptive discussion of trends in 'Verdi Criticism' and scholarship by Gregory Harwood. In the CCR, the function of a dazzling Rossinian *rondò* is brilliantly fulfilled by three chapters on 'performance', which concentrate on singing (Leonella Grasso Caprioli), staging (Mercedes Viale Ferrero) and editing (Patricia B. Brauner). The choice of placing this chapter in the context of discussions of performance (which seems to imply that critical editions are performances themselves, as opposed to tools for performers – and scholars) leaves me rather perplexed. But Brauner, who has been involved with the Rossinian *edizione critica* practically since its inception, does a fine job at demonstrating the tremendous effort and value of preparing reliable editions that provide invaluable insight into the composer's creative process and intentions, at the same time giving performers the ability to make informed decisions. The other two chapters in this section are well written and carefully documented, with useful appendices providing information on prominent Rossinian singers and set designers. Viale Ferrero's discussion is also enriched with plates (in black and white, alas) of representative set designs for nineteenth-century stagings of Rossini operas.

In spite of the unevenness and the issues outlined above (which are, at least to a certain extent, to be expected in projects of this sort), on the whole both the CCR and the CCV companions come across as worthy additions to the bibliography on nineteenth-century Italian opera. Based on the patterns of earmarking and underlining in my own copies, I expect that most of the contents will spark curiosity, and I certainly hope that many stimulating insights, passing observations and questionable remarks will prompt further reading and research. Several chapters will prove helpful for quite some time in the classroom, will often be prominently positioned at the top of the busy piles on the desks of music critics and scholars, and will indeed be faithful companions for numerous opera lovers, to whom they offer many hours of thoroughly delectable and mostly instructive reading.

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