

7 French influences

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After the French Revolution, Paris emerged as Europe's foremost political center and indisputable cultural capital, and the city began to attract composers both for occasional visits and for extended residencies. The Académie Royale de Musique (the Opéra), the most prestigious of the three major opera houses, held a particular allure. Combining splendor, technical innovation, and quality of performance, it became the institution in which any ambitious composer hoped to score lasting success. A number of Italian composers in particular made Paris their temporary or permanent home: Luigi Cherubini, Gaspare Spontini, and Gioachino Rossini wrote some of their most important works for the Opéra. Gaetano Donizetti and Giuseppe Verdi continued this tradition, the former with *La favorite* (1840) and *Dom Sébastien* (1843), the latter with *Jérusalem* (1847, an extensive reworking of *I lombardi*, 1843), *Les vêpres siciliennes* (1855), and *Don Carlos* (1867). By the time of *Don Carlos*, Verdi had mastered French grand opera to such a degree that Rossini declared him the genre's leading representative. Referring to the possibility that Verdi might again compose for the Opéra, Rossini asked the publisher Tito Ricordi to "tell [Verdi] from me that if he returns to Paris he must get himself very well paid for it, since – may my other colleagues forgive me for saying so – he is the only composer capable of writing grand opera."¹

Verdi realized early in his career that inspiration for exciting and original new works – and especially new dramatic concepts – had to come from outside Italy.² His love for Shakespeare is well known. And although one of the most effective features of Shakespearean drama – the inclusion of comic and grotesque elements for dramatic contrast and thus greater effect – was frowned upon in Italy, in France it played a major role not only in plays performed at the Parisian boulevard theatres but also in French grand operas.³ French plays provided the source for some of Verdi's earliest operas, including *Nabucco* (based on *Nabuchodonosor* by Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu, 1836) and *Ernani* (based on Hugo's *Hernani*, 1830). However, the fusion of dramatic styles did not begin to take hold until *Macbeth* (1847). There for the first time Verdi interpolated grotesque elements, giving the witches an idiosyncratic vocabulary, abrupt rhythms, awkward leaps, appoggiaturas and slides, and misaccentuations of poetry, and instructing them in the score to sing in a "hacked and cackly voice."⁴

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Verdi introduced more profound dramaturgical changes only after spending nearly two years in Paris.⁵ In 1849 at the Théâtre Historique (one of the boulevard theatres), Verdi saw *Intrigue et amour*, Alexandre Dumas père's adaptation of Friedrich Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*. Unlike Verdi's operas up to this point, *Intrigue et amour* focused on everyday characters, not on the nobility or life at court. Furthermore, it drew on the mixture of styles, adapting it to the modern subject of social injustice. In adapting this source for his opera *Luisa Miller* later the same year, Verdi specifically asked his librettist, Salvatore Cammarano, to draw on the polarity between the serious and comic for dramatic effect:

In the second act take special care over the duet between Wurm and Eloisa [later to become Luisa]. The terror and despair felt by Eloisa will make a fine contrast with the infernal indifference of Wurm. In fact it seems to me that if you were to impart a certain comical something to Wurm's character, the situation would become even more terrible.⁶

While Cammarano still toned down the innovative aspects of *Intrigue et amour*, Francesco Maria Piave fully developed them in *Rigoletto* (1851, based on Victor Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse*), thus gaining for opera a title character Verdi considered to be "a creation worthy of Shakespeare."⁷

In addition to this Shakespearean dramaturgical concept, audiences of French grand opera came to expect productions of great sophistication. Stage effects, comparable to special effects in present-day action films, became as essential an ingredient as highly realistic sets and elaborate costumes. The latter replaced the conventional stock costumes, which had commonly been reused with only minor adjustments. A composer, too, had to consider an extensive set of conventions when writing for the Opéra, including a four- or five-act structure with standard aria forms and an elaborate part for the chorus and the ballet. On the level of musical style, adaptation to French taste was more difficult to determine and accomplish. Nineteenth-century critics occasionally even questioned whether, for example, the melodic style at the Opéra could truly pass as French. In reaction to a review in a Berlin paper that detected French influences in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* responded:

Of what French opera does the Berlin paper speak here? We cannot recognize the true physiognomy of French melody except in comic operas. In serious opera, of which the major temple is the grand Opéra, as someone else has observed, French music is cosmopolitan; and in fact, quite rarely are we given the chance to perceive in the grand works performed in that theatre the vices inherent in the melody and the music of the French in general.⁸

Even those critics of the time who insisted on fundamental differences between French and Italian styles described them in vague terms. The critic of the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* implies that “French influences” may first have appeared in one of Verdi’s Italian works rather than in one specifically written for the Opéra. A particular characteristic may have come to Paris in the first place through an Italian composer, or migrated from France into an opera by one of Verdi’s predecessors and thence into his own work, or both national styles may have been influenced by a common source. Nevertheless, if a stylistic feature first appears in one of Verdi’s French operas, in one of his Italian operas shortly after he heard a French work, or while he was living in Paris, we can speak with reasonable certainty of an immediate French influence.

Aria forms

With the gradual integration of French dramatic principles within Italian opera came an increasing employment of French musical forms, particularly the ternary aria and strophic aria with refrain. While the former had characterized French opera since Gluck, the latter found its way from *opéra comique* into grand opera only after 1830.⁹ In Verdi’s work, both made their first appearance not in a French opera but in Italian operas written immediately after *Jérusalem*, while the composer was still living in Paris.

The first example of a strophic *romanza* (albeit without refrain) appears in *Il corsaro* (1848, “Non so le tette immagini,” I, 4). Strophic forms with refrain become prominent in *La traviata* (1853), appropriately enough since the story is set in Paris.¹⁰ These refrains differ from the culminating phrases (a''_4 or c_4)¹¹ of typical mid-nineteenth-century Italian melodies ($a_4 a'_4 b_2 b'_2 a''_4/c_4$) in constituting self-contained musical periods with their own symmetry and in introducing a contrasting mode, rhythm, accompaniment, and sometimes even tempo.¹²

“Ah, forse è lui” (I, 5) illustrates these departures from the mid-century lyric form (see example 7.1). Following customary parallel opening phrases $a1 a1'$ (eight measures each in short meter), and a sequential medial section consisting of four (instead of the usual two) rhythmically parallel designs ($b1 b1' b1'' b1'''$), the climactic c phrase then introduces a rhythmically and tonally distinct refrain with a new accompaniment and its own lyric form ($a2 a2' b2 b2' c2$).

True *couplets* – that is, those strophic songs that borrow from *opéra comique* not only the refrain form but also the light character – first appear in *Les vêpres siciliennes*.¹³ The popular flavor of Hélène’s “Merci, jeunes

Example 7.1 Verdi, *La traviata*, I, 5, “Ah, forse è lui” (Violetta)

(a) opening

Andantino ♩ = 96 VIOLETTA **al** *p*

dolciss.

Ah, for - se è lui che l'a - ni -

[16]

pp *leggere* 3

pp

al'

- ma so-lin-ga ne' tu - mul - ti, so-lin-ga ne' tu - mul - ti go - dea so -

(b) refrain

refrain

b1''' *ppp* de-stan-do-mi al l'a-mor!

a2 *pp* A quel - l'a-mor, quel - l'a-mor — ch'è

con espansione

a2'

pal - pi-to del - l'u - ni-ver - so, del l'u - ni-ver-so in - te - ro,

amies” (V,2), for example, derives from the bolero rhythm in the accompaniment and often conflicting melodic accents (see example 7.2). The strongest accents of the melody’s first phrase fall on “Merci,” “jeunes,” and “amies” (all with prosodic accent and musical lengthening), and “amies” (musical lengthening only), whereas those in the accompaniment fall mainly on beats 1 and 3 of the measure and thus partly on unaccented syllables. Grace

Example 7.2 Verdi, *Les vêpres siciliennes*, V, 2, “Merci, jeunes amies” (Hélène)

(a) opening

HÉLÈNE *tr* *avec grâce*
Mer - ci, — jeu - nes a -
- mi - es, — de - ces pré - sens si doux! dont — les — fleurs — si jo -

(b) refrain

HÉLÈNE *tr allarg.* refrain
Ah! — rê - ve di - vin! heu - reux dé - li - re! Mon
coeur sou - rit à vos ac - cents! — Hy - men cé - le - ste! qui re - spi - - re les

notes add to the lightness of the style.¹⁴ The refrain introduces a new mode (A major, as opposed to the preceding A minor), rhythm, and accompaniment and is self-contained on account of its independent parallel phrases and their development.

With regard to tripartite arias, “Ah! m’abbraccia... d’esultanza” from *La battaglia di Legnano* (I, 2) remains the only example until *Les vêpres siciliennes*, where the form appears on a much larger scale. In Montfort’s

Example 7.3 Verdi, *Les vêpres siciliennes*, III, 3, "Au sein de la puissance" (Montfort)

A section
Allegro giusto (♩ = 112)

MONTFORT

Au sein de la puis-san - ce, au sein_ de_ la gran - deur, un

vi - de af-freux, im - men - se, ré - gnait_ ré - gnait seul_ dans mon coeur! un

vi - de af-freux, im - men - se, un vi - de af-freux, im - men - se, ré - gnait seul dans mon

coeur! Au sein de la puis - san - ce, un vi - de af-freux, im - men - se, ré - gnait seul dans mon coeur! Le ciel vient -

Meno mosso (♩ = 92)

F# major

Example 7.3 (continued)

22 *allarg.* **a tempo**
 ap - pa - raî - tre à mes yeux à mes yeux ra-jeu - nis. Et je me

col canto **a tempo**

27 **B section** **! tempo**
 sens re - naî-tre à ce mot seul: mon fils! mon fils! ô mon fils!

! tempo

31
 La hai - ne é - ga - ra sa jeu - nes - -

34
 - se, mais près de moi, dans ce pa - lais, je veux con-qué-

“Au sein de la puissance” (III, 3), for example, it extends across 101 measures (as opposed to the thirty-seven measures of “Ah! m’abbraccia”): A (“Au sein de la puissance,” mm. 1–30), B (“La haine égara sa jeunesse,” mm. 30–44), A’ (mm. 45–73), coda (mm. 74–101) (see example 7.3).¹⁵ The length of “Au sein” allows for elaborate modulations that are usually absent from Italian arias. In the A section, for example, the music modulates to the dominant minor (m. 8), sidesteps to the Neapolitan (mm. 9–10), loses its sense of key (mm. 11–16), and finally establishes the parallel major with an independent melody (mm. 21–30).

Chorus and ballet

Traditionally more prominent in French operas than in Italian ones, choruses played particularly important musical and dramatic roles in grand opera, which required elaborate crowd scenes. Directed at providing a social and political context for the unfolding action, the chorus establishes the interests of competing social forces, clarifies the relationships between individuals and groups, contributes plot lines, and enhances the *tinta* (the overall color and atmosphere) of the work. Composers frequently employed a double chorus to juxtapose different segments of the populace, setting each part in a distinct musical style.¹⁶

Markus Engelhardt has singled out *Luisa Miller* as a turning point in Verdi's handling of the chorus.¹⁷ While the chorus does indeed contribute to the drama on both psychological and musical levels, it was in his previous opera, *La battaglia di Legnano*, that Verdi first drew significantly on all the important choral achievements of French grand opera: polychoral passages, musical and dramatic continuity (as opposed to set pieces), and grandeur.¹⁸ Verdi's instructions to his librettist Cammarano for the opera's final act reveal a decidedly French aesthetic:

At the beginning, in front of the basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, I would like to combine two or three different melodies: I would like, for example, the *priests* inside [and] the people outside to have a separate [poetic] meter and Lida a *cantabile* with a distinct meter: leave it up to me to combine them. One could also (if you agree) assign the priests lines in Latin . . . do whatever you believe to be best, but be sure the passage makes an effect.¹⁹

At this point in the opera, the Milanese are awaiting the return of the men who fought against the invading army of Frederick Barbarossa. Lida prays for the return of Arrigo, whom she loves, and Rolando, whom she married at a time when she believed Arrigo dead. The priests inside the basilica intone a Latin psalm verse ("Deus meus, pone illos"). Over the chant, both Lida and a second chorus pray, the chorus in lines of seven syllables (*settenari*, "O tu che desti il fulmine"), Lida in double lines of five (*quinari doppi*, "Ah se d'Arrigo, se di Rolando").²⁰ Even though the individual melodies are not particularly distinctive (they are both prayers, after all), Verdi succeeded in combining three ideas (two choral, one solo) of distinct melodic contours and rhythms (see example 7.4). For the conclusion of the opera, Verdi built up the forces in a typically French manner. After a short trio for Lida, Rolando, and the dying Arrigo, he introduced a chorus of townspeople and then brought back the priests, singing a *Te Deum laudamus* in four-part harmony. Gradually assimilating the initially distinct themes of the two choruses, he finally added the soloists to create a magnificent apotheosis.

Example 7.4 Verdi, *La battaglia di Legnano*, IV, 1, “Deus meus” (priests) / “O tu che desti” (people) / “Ah se d’Arrigo” (Lida)

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 1-4) features a double chorus. The vocal parts are:

- LIDA** (Soprano): *cantabile con espress.* Pa - dre! Ah se d'Arri - go e di Ro -
- PEOPLE** (Imelda with Sopranos, Tenors, Basses): *estremamente piano* O tu che de - sti il ful - mi-ne,
- PRIESTS**: *p* flam - ma com - bu - rens mon - - tes. I - - ta per -

The piano accompaniment is marked *pp* and *voce sola senza pedale*. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the vocal parts:

- PEOPLE**: - lan - - do a te la vi - ta io rac - co - man - - - do,
- PEOPLE**: che ciel go - ver - ni e ter - ra, e ciel e ter - ra,
- PEOPLE**: che ciel go - ver - ni e ter - ra, e ciel e ter - ra,
- PEOPLE**: che ciel go - ver - ni e ter - ra, e ciel e ter - ra,
- PRIESTS**: - se - que - ris il - los in tem - pe - sta - te tu - - a

It was this sort of double chorus that delighted the Parisian audiences during the first run of *Les vêpres siciliennes* in 1855. The situation unfolds outside Palermo, Sicily: soldiers of the French occupying force have just abducted Sicilian women dancing with their fiancés. Stunned, the Sicilian men launch a rhythmically conceived chorus (“Interdits – accablés”) but

Example 7.5 Verdi, *Les vêpres siciliennes*, II, 8–9, “C’en est trop” / “Jour d’ivresse” (chorus)

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes the vocal parts for HÉLÈNE, MAINFROID, DANIÉLI (with the 1st tenors of the Chorus of Sicilians), and PROCIDA. The second system includes the Chœur sur la mer (1st and 2nd sopranos, 1st and 2nd tenors, and Basses (VAUDEMONT)) and the Siciliens. The piano part is at the bottom. The lyrics are in French, and the music is in G major and 2/4 time. Dynamics include *mf* and *pp*.

are soon distracted by a boat carrying French officers and their Sicilian mistresses to the ball of the ruling French governor Montfort. The lyrical *barcarolle* of the guests (“Jour d’ivresse”) contrasts diametrically with the fragmented melody of the Sicilian men. When the two ideas converge (the Sicilian men now singing the words “C’en est trop”), they remain perfectly distinct (see example 7.5). P. A. Fiorentino, the critic for the daily newspaper *Le constitutionnel*, described the scene as follows: “The piece that literally made *furore* (never has the term been better applied) is the double chorus sung by the conspirators on stage and by the ladies and gentlemen who pass by in a boat. This beautiful song, first emerging in the distance, coming

Example 7.5 (continued)

The musical score consists of three vocal staves (H., M., P.) and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are in French and are repeated across the vocal staves. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

H. ils fré-mis-sent et de hon-te et de ra-ge
 M. ils fré-mis-sent et de hon-te et de ra-ge
 P. ils fré-mis-sent et de hon-te et de ra-ge

- li - ce Dieu d'a - mour sois nous - pro - pi - - ce viens au
 - li - ce Dieu d'a - mour sois nous pro - pi - ce viens au
 - li - ce Dieu d'a - mour sois nous - pro - pi - - ce viens au
 - li - ce Dieu d'a - mour sois nous pro - pi - ce viens au
 - li - ce Dieu d'a - mour sois nous pro - pi - ce viens au

- mis et de hon-te et de ra-ge je sau-
 - mis et de hon-te et de ra-ge je sau-
 - mis et de hon-te et de ra-ge je sau-

gradually closer, and then fading away *pianissimo*, produces a magical effect.”²¹

In grand opera, ballet played an equally essential role. Composers were expected to include a short ballet in Act II and a longer one in Act III, allowing the members of the influential Jockey Club to arrive at the Opéra after supper in time to admire their protégées among the *corps de ballet*.²² When Verdi wrote a new work for Paris or adapted an old one, he always added a substantial ballet, in part to comply with tradition but also because he believed in its dramatic effectiveness.²³

In *Macbeth*, Verdi for the first time succeeded in fully integrating the ballet. In the original version (1847), he had already insisted on a short ballet, in spite of the objections of Alessandro Lanari (the impresario of the Teatro

Example 7.6a Meyerbeer, *Robert le diable*, III, 7, ballet of the debauched nuns

Example 7.6b Verdi, *Macbeth* (1847), III, 4, “Ondine e Silfidi,” mm. 89–94

della Pergola in Florence, where *Macbeth* received its first performance). The ballet with chorus (*ballabile*, “Ondine e Silfidi”) features water spirits and aerial spirits trying to revive Macbeth, who has fainted after hearing the witches predict that Banquo’s descendants will live. The musical allusions to Meyerbeer’s ballet of the debauched nuns from Act III of *Robert le diable* did not escape early reviewers, who noted similarities not only in melodic contour but also in Verdi’s scoring of string staccatos over a harp accompaniment (see example 7.6a and b).²⁴

In the 1865 revision, a new ballet was inserted immediately after the witches’ chorus that opens Act III. Inspired by a passage from Carlo Rusconi’s 1838 translation of *Macbeth*, Verdi depicted the appearance of the goddess Hecate among the witches, chastising them for casting Macbeth’s fate without consulting her. The style of the new *Macbeth* ballet departs considerably from Verdi’s earlier scores. The melodies repeatedly sound in the low register of the cellos and brass, accompaniments frequently abandon formulaic patterns, and the instrumentation displays the originality demanded by French audiences. Instead of writing a string of independent melodies, Verdi developed them, which in turn allowed him to integrate contrasting ideas effectively. For example, the opening “rondo” theme, played by cornets and trombones, is soon accompanied by previously heard running sixteenth notes in the low strings. Verdi then drew on this accompanimental figure for an effective transition to the subsequent contrasting section (see example 7.7).

Verdi insisted that portions of his ballets be mimed and not danced, as in the ballet’s entire middle movement. This lengthy section – accounting for half of the ballet’s ten-minute duration! – largely abandons the square phrases associated with the regular step patterns of traditional ballet music.

Example 7.7 Verdi, *Macbeth* (1865), III, 2, ballet of witches, mm. 69–80

“rondo” theme

added sixteenth-note figure

(The dance stops as the dancers invoke Hecate, the goddess of night and witchcraft.)

Un poco ritenuto $\text{♩} = 100$

transition

contrasting theme over unifying sixteenth notes

Verdi depicted Hecate’s apparition with an unpredictable sequence of harmonies grouped into two five-measure phrases, following it with a simple melody in the cellos and bassoons consisting of a four-measure antecedent and a five-measure consequent (see example 7.8).

Critics immediately recognized the new style of the *Macbeth* ballet; an 1874 review in the Milanese paper *Il secolo*, summed it up perfectly: “The third act includes another ballet that has all the zest of modern music: these are three pieces that correspond to three masterworks of symphonic music.”²⁵

Instrumentation and accompaniment

The French prided themselves on the originality both of their accompaniments and of their instrumentation, limiting the use of “oom-pah-pah” and related patterns and creating dramatic effects with distinctive scoring.²⁶ French composers frequently relied on string tremolos, which allowed for greater rhythmic freedom in the vocal parts, though sometimes at the cost of rhythmic and metric clarity.

In *Les vêpres siciliennes* Verdi adapted Meyerbeer’s use of tremolos in very high registers to convey Hélène’s feelings when French soldiers force her to entertain them with a song.²⁷ She responds with the *cavatine* “Viens à

Example 7.8 Verdi, *Macbeth* (1865), III, 2, ballet of witches, mm. 120–41

(Everyone remains motionless while looking at the goddess.)

Andante ♩ = 76

p *pp* *morendo*

(Hecate expresses to the witches her awareness of their work and of the reasons why she had been summoned.)

nous, Dieu tutélaire” (I, 2), a prayer invoking God’s salvation, to which the strings add a sustained tremolo supported by running triplets in the flutes and clarinets in a relatively low register (see example 7.9). This accompaniment avoids melodic and rhythmic patterns, a sense of meter being conveyed solely through harmonic rhythm and the natural accents of the text.

Verdi sometimes employs instrumentation with such skill that sound combines with the dramatic situation to create a climactic moment, as for example in the Act II love duet between Elisabeth and Carlos in *Don Carlos*. King Philip II of Spain has married the French princess Elisabeth

Example 7.9 Verdi, *Les vêpres siciliennes*, I, 2, “Viens à nous, Dieu tutélaire” (Hélène)

of Valois for purely political reasons; she, however, is in love with Philip's son, Carlos. Returning her feelings, Carlos cannot bear to see Elisabeth at his father's side, and in a passionate duet he begs her to obtain his passage to Flanders. Carlos responds to her farewell with a stereotypical *cabaletta* text:

Ô prodige! mon coeur déchiré se
console!
Ma douleur poignante s'envole!
Le ciel a pitié de mes pleurs . . .
À vos pieds, éperdu de tendresse,
je meurs!

O wonder! My torn heart finds
consolation!
My poignant pain is dissipating!
Heaven has pity on my tears . . .
At your feet, overcome with tenderness,
I die!

Instead of launching a *cabaletta*-like movement, however, Verdi wrote a declamatory vocal line over an orchestral canvas that relies primarily on instrumentation for its atmosphere (see example 7.10). The blend of high-pitched violins and violas, the melodic doubling in the woodwinds (the first bassoon in an unusually high register), and the soft background colors of the low brass and the harp (the latter a favorite instrument of the French) combine with the initial harmonic shift from B flat major to D flat major

Example 7.10 Verdi, *Don Carlos*, II, 9, "Ô prodige!" (Carlos)

The musical score is arranged in a standard orchestral format. The instruments and their parts are as follows:

- Fl.:** Part with triplets and *pp cant. espr.* dynamics.
- Eng. hn.:** Part with triplets and *pp cant. espr.* dynamics.
- Cl. in Bb:** Part with triplets and *pp cant. espr.* dynamics.
- Bsn.:** Part with triplets and *pp* dynamics.
- Tbn.:** Part with rests.
- Ophicleide:** Part with rests.
- Hp.:** Part with triplets and *pp* dynamics.
- CARLOS:** Vocal line with lyrics: "Ô pro-di-ge! mon coeur dé-chi-ré se con-so-le! ma dou-". Includes markings for *avec exaltation* and *parlé*.
- Vn.:** Violin part with *pizz.* and *arco* markings and *pp* dynamics.
- Va.:** Viola part with *pizz.* and *arco* markings and *pp* dynamics.
- Vc.:** Violoncello part with *pp* dynamics.
- Cb.:** Contrabass part with *pp* dynamics.

Example 7.10 (continued)

The musical score consists of several systems of staves. The top system includes five staves: four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and one piano accompaniment staff. The vocal lines feature melodic phrases with triplets and accents. The piano accompaniment includes a bass line with a double sharp (a²) and a treble line with a steady eighth-note pattern. The second system shows the continuation of the vocal lines and piano accompaniment. The third system features a vocal line with the lyrics: - leur poi-gnan-te s'en-vo-le! The piano accompaniment continues with a similar eighth-note pattern. The final system shows the vocal lines and piano accompaniment concluding the passage.

and the deliberate lack of rhythmic distinction to evoke an otherworldly feeling of suspended reality and sheer ecstasy.²⁸

Melodic style

Some stylistic aspects of French opera can be better explained by the distinct rhythmic qualities of French verse than by the expectations of French audiences. Like their Italian counterparts, French librettos consist entirely of verse, sometimes but not always grouped in stanzas. But while Italian verse relies heavily on regular accents, French verse allows for a wide variety of accentual positions. With the gradual disappearance of the melismatic melodic style, Italian composers came to rely on prosodic regularity in order to comply with the Italian preference for symmetry, regular rhythms, and their natural development.²⁹ For example, lines of six syllables (*senari* in Italian terminology) always have an accent on the second and fifth syllable; lines of eight syllables (*ottonari*) always on the third and seventh. Even if the prosodic accents are less regularly spaced – as in some types of lines of five syllables (*quinari*) and seven syllables (*settenari*) – Verdi could nevertheless draw on regular musical rhythms because Italian theory allowed violation of some prosodic accents.³⁰ The following quatrain of *settenari* from Act I of *La traviata* provides a good example (accented syllables are italicized; see also example 7.1 above):

	<i>Prosodic accents (syllables)</i>	<i>Musical accents (syllables)</i>
Ah, forse <i>è</i> lui che l' anima	1 (or possibly 2), 4, 6	1, 4, 6
Solinga ne' tumulti	2, 6	1, (4), 6
Godea sovente pingere	2, 4, 6	1, 4, 6
De' suoi colori <i>oc</i> culti! ...	4, 6	1, (4), 6

Although some French theories allow for scanning against the inherent accentual structure of the line, French composers tended to restrict such freedom to lighter numbers associated with *opéra comique*.³¹ In serious numbers, they usually observed at least the most important syntactic and semantic accents of a line, even if these are spaced irregularly. To accommodate this irregularity, the prestigious French critic Castil-Blaze suggested creating a melody that is “*vague, without determined character*, that does not create too much sense of rhythm and does not shock the prosody too much,” an appropriate suggestion for a language having generally weak word accents.³² Nineteenth-century French composers increasingly drew on this solution, but it is not always clear whether the “vagueness” was the result of irregular accentuation, the composer’s expressive ideal regardless of accentual structure, or both.

In writing such melodies, a composer might continuously vary the rhythm or use equal note values to distribute the weight of syllables evenly; he might introduce broad meters and accompanimental patterns or avoid formulaic accompaniments altogether; or he could reflect prosodic accents by duration (i.e. long notes) rather than stress (i.e. by placing notes on metrically strong beats), thus neutralizing the underlying metric structure with its implied accentual positions. The latter solution was particularly intriguing because French theorists of the nineteenth century could not agree as to whether their prosodic accent was primarily an accent of duration or one of stress.³³

Several types of French line challenged Verdi's compositional instincts. The most prominent of these is the *octosyllabe*, the line of eight syllables according to the French system of counting and nine syllables (*novenario*) according to the Italian.³⁴ Whereas *novenari* are virtually absent from nineteenth-century Italian opera librettos, precisely because their accentual structure lacks regularity, *octosyllabes* occur commonly in French librettos.³⁵ Two examples from *Les vèpres siciliennes* may illustrate Verdi's treatment both of unusual syllable counts and of irregular patterns of accents. The first opens the duet proper between Henri and Hélène (II, 3):

Comment, dans ma reconnaissance	(2, 8)
Payer un pareil dévouement?	(2, 5, 8)
À vous, ma seule providence,	(2, 4, 8)
À vous et ma vie et mon sang!	(2, 5, 8)

Verdi could have set this quatrain in triple meter with accents on [2,5,8], violating only the accent on "seule" and overemphasizing only one additional syllable ("re[connaissance]"). Nevertheless, the dance-like quality of regular triple meter would not have conformed to the passionate dialogue between Hélène and Henri, and aligning the accents with the strongest metrical beats would have caused difficulty in the fast tempo of this movement. Verdi responded to the unusual rhythmic qualities of the text with predominantly even note values in the context of a vague musical meter. Only the end of each line provides some distinction between longer and shorter syllables and thus a greater sense of metric clarity (see example 7.11). The unusually long upbeat of three quarter notes, the chromatic harmony at the beginning of the first two distichs, the lack of symmetry within the four-measure phrases, and the metrically vague accompaniment all contribute to the sense of instability, indicating the discharge of passion in this passage. The accompaniment plays a particularly crucial role in this process: the pattern, shortened to the duration of a single quarter note, does not lend any

Example 7.11 Verdi, *Les vêpres siciliennes*, II, 3, “Comment dans ma reconnaissance” (Hélène, Henri)

HÉLÈNE
Com - ment, dans ma re - con - nais - san - ce pa -

- yer un pa-reil dé - voue-ment?

HENRI
À vous, ma seu - le pro - vi - den - ce, à

establishment of metric clarity

HÉLÈNE
vous_ et ma vie et mon sang! Pour vous d'un ty-ran san - gui-nai - re. Vous a -

metrical support to the melody because it stresses every note to the same degree.

The opening melody of the quartet “Adieu, mon pays” (*Les vêpres siciliennes*, IV, 5) is also based on *octosyllables*:

Adieu, mon pays, je succombe
Sans briser ta captivité!
Je meurs sans vengeance! et ma tombe
Est celle de ta liberté!

The irregularity of their rhythmic groups calls for either textual or musical adjustments if parallel phrasing and reasonably regular rhythms are to be maintained. Verdi decided on a small lyric form, setting the first two lines

Example 7.12 Verdi, *Les vêpres siciliennes*, IV, 5, “Adieu, mon pays, je succombe” (Procida)

PROCIDA
cantabile

Adagio (♩ = 44)

Adagio (♩ = 44)

1

a

A-dieu, mon pa-ys, je suc-com - - -

3

2

3

5

2

3

b

- be sans bri-ser, sans bri-ser ta cap-ti-vi-té! Je meurs sans ven-

3

3

2

2

2

6

b'

c

- gean-ce! je meurs sans ven-gean-ce! et ma tom-be est cel-le de ta li-ber-

dim: smorz.

to parallel *a* and *a'* phrases, part of the third line to shorter *b* and *b'* phrases, and the remaining text to the concluding cadential *c* phrase (see example 7.12). The accommodation of the lyric form required word repetition in two instances (“Sans briser” and “Je meurs sans vengeance”); parallel musical phrases, the solemn pace suggested by the sense of the text, and avoiding misaccentuations required interpretation of prosodic accents as accents of duration. In accommodating this rhythm, Verdi consistently set prosodic accents to longer notes or groups of notes, with exceptions only in the cadential flourish at the end.

These textual irregularities and Verdi's decisions regarding form and prosody had consequences for the melodic rhythm. Measuring the rate at which syllables are delivered against the predominant harmonic half note rhythm, we find a wide range from one to six syllables (see example 7.12). As a consequence, most melodic subphrases feature distinct rhythms.

While the Italians tended to understand "development" as building an extended formal section from a memorable rhythmic idea, the French emphasized the meaning of "developing the passions" through a series of contrasting though not diametrically opposed melodic ideas.³⁶ To Italian audiences, therefore, French arias or duets seemed to lack unity, appearing incoherent, fragmented ("spezzate"), and constantly contrasting. The frequent change of poetic meter in French librettos and the importance of expressing the sentiment of the text at any given moment led to a musical style that differed fundamentally from the Italian one. In stanzas with irregular accentuation and poetic meter, composers often repeated words early in a stanza for reasons of proportion and balance, or they introduced a new idea sooner than the Italians would have done. The latter distinction did not escape Italian critics. Alberto Mazzucato censured the broken phrases of *Le prophète*, arguing, "And if [the phrase] does not break off, it is transformed into a new design, sets out on a new and unexpected path, so that its second part no longer seems to have any regular connection with the first."³⁷ Both French and Italian reviews noted this characteristic in *Les vêpres siciliennes* – either as praise or criticism, depending on the point of view.³⁸ For example, Pietro Torrigianti recognized the new melodic quality of *Les vêpres siciliennes* but blamed Verdi for poor craftsmanship:

Chief among the defects observed in this score is the lack of a nexus and a connection between the melodic ideas; so that rather than fused they appear stitched together, to the detriment of the musical language, which, though composed of parts that are very regular in themselves, seems to proceed without any aim.³⁹

Verdi again used this approach in *Don Carlos*, as may be seen in the second duet for Carlos and Elisabeth (II, 9). Inspired in part by the change of poetic meters from *octosyllables* in the stanza for Carlos to polymeters for Elisabeth and back to *octosyllables* and then alexandrines for Carlos and by the constant emotional shifts (even in mid-verse), he wrote a succession of melodies that progresses freely, in a chain of rhythmically and melodically independent ideas that express the changing moods of the poetry (see example 7.13).

In the following text, asterisks denote the beginning of a new melody or a rhythmically independent phrase.⁴⁰

CARLOS

*Quoi! pas un mot, pas une plainte,
Une larme pour l'exilé!
*Ah! que du moins la pitié sainte
Dans votre regard m'ait parlé!
*Hélas! mon âme se déchire...
Je me sens mourir... *Insensé!
J'ai supplié dans mon délire
Un marbre insensible et glacé!

CARLOS

Ah, not a word; you would send me
into exile with no farewell!
Calmly you turn aside and leave me,
no glances of tender regret!
Alas! My soul is in torment...
Alas! In despair I'll die. Cruel heart!
So I have cried to a statue of marble,
yes, marble, quite unfeeling and cold!

ÉLISABETH

*Carlos n'accusez pas mon coeur
d'indifférence.
Comprenez mieux sa fierté... son
silence.
*Le devoir, saint flambeau, devant mes
yeux a lui,
Je marche conduite par lui,
Mettant au ciel mon espérance!

ÉLISABETH

Oh, Carlos, how can you call my heart
unfeeling and cruel?
Can you not tell why I'm stern, why
I'm silent?
Like a flame, clear and bright, duty
shines to light my path,
and her light must be my guide.
For God alone can help and save me!

CARLOS

*Ô bien perdu... Trésor sans prix!
Ma part de bonheur dans la vie!
Parlez Élisabeth: enivrée et ravie,

Mon âme, à votre voix, rêve du paradis!

CARLOS

O love, once mine, O love I lost!
My one hope of joy, all I live for!
Speak on, fill my soul with
enchantment,
for, when I hear your tender voice,
paradise then is mine!

French stylistic traits continue to play an essential role in Verdi's last two operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, where they become integral elements of his personal style. Melodic rhythm and mood vary continuously, and instrumentation and accompaniment maintain a high level of sophistication. In the love duet at the end of Act I of *Otello*, for example, the passage "Ingentilia di lacrima... e gli astri a benedir" constitutes a short but distinct limb in the chain of melodies, devoid of symmetry, and shows the rhythmic variety characteristic of French opera (see example 7.14). As in examples from French operas discussed earlier, the orchestral accompaniment lacks any pattern, allowing for a free unfolding of the melodic rhythm with long upbeats and a tendency to mark accents by duration rather than stress. In addition, the beauty of the instrumentation with its initial combination of high violins, expressive bassoon line, and blend of lower strings and winds,

Example 7.13 Verdi, *Don Carlos*, II, 9, “Quoi! pas un mot” (Carlos, Élisabeth)

(Élisabeth fait un geste d'adieu à Carlos et veut s'éloigner.)

ÉLISABETH

- main!

CARLOS

Quoi! pas un mot, u-ne plain-te, u-ne lar-me pour l'e-xi-lé!

Ah! que du moins la pi-tié sain-te dans vo-tre re-gard m'ait par-lé! Hé-

las! mon â-me se dé-chi-re... hé-las! je me sens mou-

-rir... In-sen-sé! j'ai sup-pli-é dans mon dé-li-re un mar-bre, un

plus animé $\text{♩} = 80$

poco più mosso $\text{♩} = 88$

très doux

pp

riten.

col canto

ancora

pp

dim.

morendo

pp

ff

Example 7.13 (continued)

très émue
ÉLISABETH
Car-los n'ac-cu-sez pas mon coeur d'in-dif-fé-
mar-bre in-sen-si-ble et gla-cé!

Allegro moderato ♩ = 100
p

- ren-ce. Com-pre-nez mieux sa fier-té... son si-len-ce. Le de-
voir, saint flam-beau, de-vant mes yeux a
lui, et je mar-che gui-dée par lui, met-tant au

cantabile
p
pp

Example 7.13 (continued)

ciel, au ciel, met-tant au ciel mon es-pé-ran-ce!

ce!

CARLOS *d'une voix mourante*

Ô bien per-du... trésor sans prix! Ma part de bon-

Meno mosso ♩ = 84

p espressivo

pp 3 3 3 3 3 3

the reinforcement of the sighing half step at “di sospir” by horn, bass clarinet, and English horn, and the expansion of the sound at “paradiso” add distinction to this passage while supporting the sense of the text. Even the phrasing, though apparently regular, consists of irregular subphrases of 3 + 1 and 1 + 2 + 1 measures respectively (marked by brackets above the staff).

Passages from *Les vêpres siciliennes*, *Don Carlos*, and *Otello* discussed here indicate that French influences on Verdi’s operas went far beyond the use of characteristic forms, choruses, and ballets. Thanks to Verdi’s strong musical personality, these influences never constricted his musical development. Following his first newly composed opera for Paris, *Les vêpres siciliennes*, Verdi created some of his most original and successful compositions, and his talent for successfully assimilating the best of existing musical traditions into original creations marks him as one of the most significant composers of nineteenth-century opera.

Example 7.14 Verdi, *Otello*, 1, 2, “Già nella notte densa” (Otello, Desdemona)

Fl.

Picc.

Ob.

Eng. hn.

Cl. in Bb

B. cl.

Bsn.

in F

Hns.

in C

Hp.

DESDEMONA

duol.

OTELLO

In-gen-ti - lia di la - - cri-me la sto-ria il tuo bel vi - so — e il lab-bro di so - spir, scen-dean sul-le mie

morendo

sulla 2.^a corda

Vns.

Va.

Vc.

Cb.

Example 7.14 (continued)

The musical score is arranged in systems. The first system includes Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), English Horn (Eng. hn.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bass Clarinet (B. cl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Horn in F (in F), Horn in C (in C), Harp (Hp.), Double Bass (D.), and Oboe Soloist (O.). The second system includes Violins (Vns.), Violas (Va.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.).

Key musical features include:

- Woodwinds:** Flute, Oboe, English Horn, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, and Bassoon all play a melodic line starting with a *Solo* and *p* dynamic. The Bassoon and Horns in F and C play a sustained *pp* accompaniment.
- Strings:** Violins, Violas, and Violoncello play a rhythmic accompaniment with *pizz.* (pizzicato) markings. The Contrabass also plays with *pizz.* markings.
- Vocal Soloists:** The Oboe Soloist (O.) has a vocal line with lyrics: "te - ne - bre la glo - ria, il pa - ra - di - so e gli a - stri a be - ne - dir." The Double Bass (D.) has lyrics: "Ed io ve - dea fra le tue tem - pie o -".
- Performance Markings:** *Solo*, *p*, *pp*, *legato*, and *pizz.* are used throughout the score.