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OTELLO AND FALSTAFF:  
A CRITICAL STUDY OF  
VERDI'S LAST OPERAS

J. D. SHUTE

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## INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

To attain the objective of this dissertation it has been essential to destroy systematically several of the critical legends which have grown up around the works in question. Such a mission is hardly new; many people have tried by judicious pruning of the parasitic theories to allow the real growth light and air necessary for its survival, but sooner or later the stifling tendrils reappear. Deracination, then, would appear to be the cure.

The two main legends are mutually exclusive; one speaks of a new Verdi; the other of a Verdi influenced by Wagner. I wish to prove that neither of these theories is true.

Secondly, and again the product of legends, the part played by Boito has never been fully investigated, or even investigated to the point where a critical appraisal has been possible. Since Luzio, searching through the Verdi archives came across Boito's sketch of the ending of Otello with a line drawn by Verdi through the last section, we have been led to assume that the composer maintained the same dominant position with Boito as he had with his earlier librettists. The facts since unearthed deny this, so another investigation is justified.

The Italians have concentrated their attentions on biography in the hope that the music, and this Verdi would have applauded, speaks for itself. Even in biography, they find themselves sharply divided into two camps over some issues, those who follow Luzio and those who follow Gatti. All have one feature in common; they seem to be trying

to make their preconceived image of Verdi fit the facts. Misreading of evidence, grossly-prejudiced interpretation of facts, and even deliberate concealing of information are not rare. All these failings together with the lack of critical demarcation between fact and opinion, the excessively picturesque commentary, and general pleonasm make the interpretation of Italian biography difficult. The Italians, of course, have not ignored completely the study of his music but this approach is, in general, too deferential, admitting of no wrong.

The standard work in English on Verdi, the man and musician, is still Francis Toye, but no-one would claim his treatment of the last two operas as exhaustive or final. This has, regrettably, been re-issued by photographic re-print, so that the many factual errors exposed since 1931 are to be perpetuated at least for another generation. Hussey's Verdi, 1940, is valuable, particularly on music, but again, overloaded with biographical errors. More recently, 1962, the final word on biographical matters in any language has been stated by the late Frank Walker who in a veritable monument of diligent scholarship has destroyed the apocryphal stories and factual mistakes.

The remainder of the works in English are more difficult to assess. A new treatment of Verdi the man by Vincent Sheean [Orpheus at Eighty, 1958] proves to be a compound of rechauffé Gatti, interludes by Freud, and passages of real value. There is, as well, a translation [not altogether good] of Gatti in an abridged version of 1955. The "Verdi" of Pierre Petit, again badly translated, arrived in 1960: this is valuable only for its pictures. Only one book,

recommended in Grove V, is concerned in particular with the last works of Verdi; on this it would be undignified to comment.

Finally, I have endeavoured to preserve a sense of historical perspective in this investigation, a feature only too rare in our older histories of music which presume to measure Verdi by the yardstick of Wagner's music-dramas and Beethoven's symphonies. One recalls Bernard Shaw's remarks on Wagner: "Had he been a Sandwich Islander, he could have done nothing." Verdi was Italian and the inheritor of a tradition that paid scant regard to Mozart, none to Gluck, but rejoiced in Rossini. Nothing could be further from the truth than to imagine Verdi composing his operas against a background of the Ninth Symphony and the last string quartets. Even in Germany von Bulow was still forced to "baptize the infidels with a fire-hose." [ Hanslick writing of that gentleman's double performance of Beethoven's Ninth. ] As late as 1876 Mazzucato testified that the Library of the Milan Conservatory possessed only one copy of Beethoven's symphonies, and that a cheap edition, full of mistakes. The same article [ Grove II on 'Boito' ] says: "Music and opera were synonymous words, and no one cared for anything that had not been or could not be performed with success at La Scala." With notable exceptions, English musical criticism of Verdi throughout the nineteenth century judged Verdi by standards hitherto applied to Rossini and Mendelssohn and standards which were either ethical or anti-operatic. For example La Traviata was not a nice story; Nabucco, sacrosanct because of its biblical origin should not be made the subject of an opera; Chorley objected to a rather

mountainous Violetta being a consumptive, saying "a ballet with a lame sylphide would be as rational." Then at the turn of the century come the judgments based on Wagnerian aesthetics, and Verdi had redeemed himself in his old age by copying Wagner.

The subject has been treated in the following manner: first, Verdi and Boito and the details of their collaboration: secondly, the results of this, namely the finished librettos: thirdly, *Otello*, the lyric drama: fourthly, *Falstaff*, the lyric comedy: lastly, the final impressions, the Wagner-Verdi question, etc. This treatment appears more likely to have secured definite results and is in direct opposition to all the other Verdian commentators, particularly the English writers in whose books Wagner and Verdi, opera synopses and scenarios for libretti, facts and opinions vie with one another to such a degree in their efforts to attract the reader's attention that the final analysis always fails to convince.

I have avoided footnotes, completely, since their appearance in typescript is invariably ugly: instead I have made reference in the text to author and page in brackets and included a list of sources consulted, arranged under author and title.



CHAPTER ONE

VERDI AND BOITO: COLLABORATION

CHAPTER ONEVERDI AND BOITO: COLLABORATION

The value of biographic detail in criticism is often questioned by those critics who profess to believe that "the music's the thing": an opinion scarcely valid for opera since it pre-supposes either the utmost triviality <sup>or</sup> ~~at~~ the absolute worthlessness of the libretto, or denigrates the very efficacy of opera. Biographic detail in this instance is essential and for these reasons: first, because it helps to sharpen our insight into the creative processes in Boito and Verdi; secondly, because it shows marked deviations from the normal procedure of Verdi's artistic life, thus contributing to a "new Verdi": finally, this biographic detail has been retailed in so many forms that the truth is long overdue. Thanks to a mass of new evidence not available to the biographers and critics of the 30's, we can now approach much nearer the truth.

Verdi was born of poor and illiterate parents in the little hamlet of Le Roncole, near Bussetto in the Duchy of Parma, then under the jurisdiction of the French Authorities. The young boy graduated from the spinet supplied by his father to lessons given by the local church organist and when his aptitude for music had been observed he progressed the three kilometres to Bussetto, where, under the benevolent patronage of the rich Antonio Barezzi, he studied with the cathedral organist. It is important to remember that even the small town of Bussetto boasted a cathedral, an opera house, a Philharmonic Society and military band. In this atmosphere he combined general education, music

lessons and the part-time employment which helped to pay for his lodging. As soon as he was old enough he began to compose occasional pieces which received immediate performance.

Having learnt all that the municipality could offer, he left for Milan and the Conservatory supported partly by a local scholarship and to a greater degree by the munificence of Barezzi. Rejected by the Conservatory - he was over-age - he began lessons with a private teacher until such time as he could realise the ambition to which all this instruction was directed, and succeed to the musical throne of Bussetto. The musical education he received in Milan from Lavigna was a stern and rigorous discipline, "canon and fugue in all the sauces", and he studied opera by constant attendance at La Scala where the largest part of the repertoire was always new work or recently successful opera.

Back at Bussetto, his education completed, rival factions contended over the succession to the newly-vacated post of organist and Director of the Philharmonic, while he himself sat back, now, having tasted La Scala, not even wanting the job. When the dispute had been settled he took the job and married Barezzi's daughter, his career now assured. Before very long had passed this placid existence proved irksome and the young couple moved to Milan where his first opera was produced in 1839. This was so successful that he received an immediate commission for two new works to be ready for the next season.

Tragedy had however already caught up with the young Verdi. He had recently lost an infant son and daughter and before his first new work materialised his wife died; such were the conditions which

accompanied his first attempt at a comic opera. The work failed and Verdi retired in despair.

Merelli, the impresario at La Scala finally managed to persuade him to consider the libretto of Nabucco and, once again his imagination was fired. This opera, 1842, first spread his fame through Italy and the public heard a voice that was forceful, vigorous and compelling rather than original. From this point his fortunes never wavered; success crowned success with such rapidity that artistic progress was minimal. Verdi himself called these five years "the years of the galley": ten operas and travel throughout Europe to produce them made him a tyrant in the opera house but gave him an unrivalled capacity to "bend the notes" to his will. Visits to London, Paris and Vienna, allowed him to study contemporary opera in its different aspects in performance.

All his operas from this period are set in a conventional mould, the type developed by Mayr, Rossini, Mercadante and, later Bellini and Donizetti, which owed much of its inspiration to the horrors of the French Revolutionary genre. Briefly the characteristics of the form were these; vocal melody reigned supreme; the work was divided into the conventional numbers; woodwind and horns had gained a permanent place in the orchestra where accompanied recitative was more the rule than the exception; the chorus was an important feature; pastiche, still far from obsolete, was on the wane; ensemble singing was beginning to make its way in serious opera. The audience demanded only to be entertained and the easiest way of satisfying their apparently insatiable

Not for the  
first time.

appetite was to offer sensuous vocal melody supported by able orchestration, an easily-intelligible story and effective scenes.

The only new features which appeared with early Verdi were a patent sincerity and a boundless, powerful energy of expression. To these were added an uninhibited patriotic flavour which alone was sufficient to transport the audience into raptures in an Italy struggling towards unification. This audience was even able to read a patriotic interpretation into such a progressive work as *Macbeth*; Verdi was inevitably and inextricably tied up with the movement towards Italian unity; he was an ardent patriot, friend of first Mazzini, then Cavour; a deputy in the first Parliament and then a Senator. Under these circumstances it is easy to see the reasons for Verdi's popularity and also the cause of his virtual artistic stagnation. A lesser man would probably have succumbed to the lure of easy gains but Verdi gradually fought his way out of the doldrums and *Macbeth* marks the beginning of the battle.

The effectiveness and originality of the scoring are the most noticeably new features of *Macbeth* but we must not forget the composer's words on the interpretation of Lady Macbeth's role which he did not want to be sung so much as lived.

Six more productions after *Macbeth*, with only *Luisa Miller* showing anything new, Verdi, now flushed with success and prosperous, settled down with his wife-to-be, back in Bussetto and prepared to meet the world on his own terms. The first works of this maturity were his three most popular operas which are so well known that their novelties

pass unnoticed: *Rigoletto*, his best work to date, was conceived as a series of duets; one of the main characters does not even have an aria; there is the new fusion of aria into recitative; a greater attention to the musical characterisation of individuals and a general air of character about the opera which forbids absolutely any confusion with another opera. This was the best libretto he had treated and the point is significant.

It would be as well to pause here and consider just what was entailed in the production of a libretto for Verdi. Up to and including *Aida*, all his operas were commissioned works with a firm delivery-date. Verdi himself had undergone no literary training and judged his libretti by their theatrical effectiveness only. If he could see an overall character to the story, the opportunity for powerful scenes, if he could feel a certain sympathy with the subject, he was generally satisfied. He had no faculty for taking in the drama as a whole conception other than by a naive intuition which occasionally played him false. Thus he chose such subjects as *Boccanegra*, *Forza del Destino* and *Trovatore* stories which any normal man would have shunned (like the plague.) This, then, was his custom. He chose the subject, made his own scenario and generally supervised its turning into verse, making recommendations, vetoing suggestions so that the resultant libretto was as much Verdi's as the librettist's. It is as well to remember these facts when we come across the sad tales about the wretched composer who was forced to submit to the worst excrescences of poetry ever perpetrated. By paying his poet an agreed sum at the outset,

the libretto became his property to use at will and the poet was simply retained to perform the constant alterations which the composer always required before, during and, not seldom, after production.

Rigoletto, then, marks the point of departure for the mature Verdi. From now on, each new work was a challenge to his artistry, each showed a refinement of technique in some field of composition. Traviata is evidence of his grappling with a modern subject and the through-composition of the ball-scene. Les Vepres Siciliennes shows him tackling La Grande Boutique in French with a real grand opera, trying to spread himself to the five-act mastodon with all its attendant frippery. Ballo in Maschera is the first occasion on which a contrapuntal treatment appears in his work; in Oscar the page we see Verdi in lighter vein and even the conspirators have learned to laugh. Forza del Destino goes further in this direction of comic relief supplied by the friar, Melitone; there is also a more systematic use of the reminiscence-motive to bind whole scenes together. With Don Carlos he returned to Paris prepared to beat Meyerbeer at his own game and he failed with this work of uneven inspiration which is yet packed with some of his most moving music.

Then comes Aida which represents the consolidation of all these new features, a rare instance of Verdi grasping a rich dramatic subject in its entirety. This is also the one instance in Verdi's long career for which we can reconstruct the complete picture of his relations with his librettist; the attention to the most intricate detail; long letters about the choice of single words; the superbly logical development of the drama.

All these improvements were brought about by sheer hard, but organised work by the composer. The guitar-like accompaniments of the early period have disappeared. Verdi had been in the habit of composing in outline only the whole of an opera and then he would go back to the beginning and score the whole work working from top to bottom of the score as fast as hand and eye could move. In this new system he filled in many of the details as he went along and the orchestration of the completed opera became more and more complex as his mastery of the medium matured. Each new work took longer than its predecessor and the intervals between consecutive undertakings grew longer and longer. All the works up to and including Aida were commissioned. With the Cairo production of that work, that state of affairs came to an end. The receipts from that work made him so rich that he could afford to please himself and he dictated his own terms.

One of the notable features of Aida was that it served to draw Boito and Verdi closer together than they had been for a number of years and this would be an opportune moment to sketch the development of Verdi's future librettist.

Arrigo Boito was born in Padua in 1842, his father an Italian and his mother a Polish countess. The father occupied his energies in painting miniatures and dissipating the family fortunes and it was left to the mother to make adequate provision for the education of young Arrigo. As a matter of interest and as a pointer to the many romantic traits of character he later exhibited, his real, baptised name was ~~Henrico~~, a common Italian name, which he later changed to Arrigo. Unlike



Verdi, he did gain admission to the Milan Conservatory at the age of twelve and he studied there for seven years. Again, unlike the young Verdi who was forced to pursue his studies alone, he was fortunate enough to meet a kindred spirit, Franco Faccio who later distinguished himself as the conductor of Verdi's final works. Both of these men jumped into prominence in their student days with compositions of a patriotic nature for which Boito wrote the verse and Faccio the music.

On leaving the Conservatory, their formal education complete, the pair were welcomed in all the salons of Milan high society, chief among which was that of the Countess Maffei, one of Verdi's most intimate friends. The result of this was that Verdi was always kept well-informed about the deeds and sayings of the two young men. As Boito himself later confessed, these were wild days and they reformed Italian art every evening between dinner and supper. They applied for and were granted travelling scholarships which took them to Paris while Verdi was rehearsing *Forza del Destino* in Russia. Rossini welcomed them in Paris and there they were regular guests for dinner at his home. Verdi also made them feel at home when he returned and this was where the commission for Boito to write the poem of Verdi's later contribution to the London Exhibition of 1862 originated. A letter of thanks from the composer accompanied his gift of a gold watch to Boito; the note reads: "Remember my name and the value of time." [Nardi, p.92] One can only assume from the last part of the statement that Verdi had summed up

Boito very quickly. The paths of the two men never crossed again until the first steps in the making of *Otello* in 1879 and a summary of events

*This is general - Boito was unapologetic that is all!  
All the biographies make this same statement (some "mystery")*

during the intervening years will elucidate the reasons for such a prolonged estrangement.

There was a strange, inexplicable dichotomy about Boito, a product of his romantic spirit which comes out even in such prosaic matters as the autograph of his works. That portion which the critical intellect approved was signed Arrigo Boito; to the rest he gave the undecieving anagram Tobia Gorrio. It is significant that the two libretti for Verdi together with his own operas all bear the real name. Then there is the actual speed at which the man was able to work for other people, Verdi included, and the apparent ceaseless labour he devoted to his own work. In fact, he realised this and admitted that his fault was that he studied his subject too closely; at one juncture in his preparation of the libretto for his own opera Nerone he lays out detailed instructions on almost thirty types of Roman soldier, every scrap of information culled from classical texts; to each of these Verdi of the Risorgimento would have given a spear and helmet. It is probably true to say that Boito had everything but (genius, that is) the genius required to put his great schemes into operation as music.

specifically,  
because of  
this.

His tastes were much more ambitious than Verdi's. He had enjoyed all the advantages of a sound musical and literary education and had experienced a much greater variety of musical influences at an age when he was most impressionable. The symphonies and quartets of Beethoven had left a permanent mark on him as had much of the tradition of German symphonic music. Still, he did not attempt to write symphonies or quartets based on his foreign models but endeavoured to infuse something

of their spirit into Italian opera. Both he and Faccio threw themselves into composition with the enthusiasm and intemperance common to youth and romanticism. Their cosmopolitan musical background produced a music which was new in Italy but by the time that the eclecticism had been <sup>developed?</sup> assimilated into anything resembling a personal style, Faccio's fire was spent and he devoted his energies to conducting.

These were "the years of rebellious youth" for the artists of young Italy and in the vanguard strode Boito, Faccio and Praga. Their ammunition, speeches, odes and manifestoes, was constantly fired at the decadence of Italian art, the opera in particular; their supply-line was Baudelaire and absinthe. It was a battle they waged without regard to the extravagance of their claims but, in general, their targets were nameless; it was a dissatisfaction with and contempt for the aimlessness of contemporary Italian art, rather than a virulent attack on any individual contribution. When the need arose Boito and Faccio did not scorn real battle; in 1866 they joined Garibaldi's army, but too late to share in any glory. They only saw the enemy once and that in the distance.

Boito and Praga invaded the theatre with a comedy which was an ignominious failure; an opera by Faccio and Praga met with a similar lack of success in 1863 and it was after this catastrophe, at a dinner in honour of Faccio that Boito declaimed the celebrated "Ode, with glass in Hand", not incidentally his only post-prandial gaffe. It was the fourth stanza which attracted so much attention: in English it reads: "Perhaps the man is already born who will again exalt art, truthful and

pure, upon the altar, that altar sullied like the wall of a brothel." Verdi was certainly justified in taking offence.

A letter from Verdi to the Countess Maffei dated 31 July 1863 [C.V.4, p.83] and thus antedating the poem by some months, mentions his meetings in Paris with the two men who were then in residence: "they are certainly two young men with much intellect, but I am not in a position to speak of their musical talent because, as yet I have heard nothing of Boito ... These two men are accused of being very warm admirers of Wagner. There's nothing wrong with that, so long as admiration does not degenerate into imitation. Wagner is not the wild beast the purists would have us believe: nor is he the prophet his apostles would wish."

The offending poem hit the headlines at once and Verdi saw its indeed reference to it appears over and over again for the next twelve years or so; it is always given slight variations, indicating undoubtedly just how well he remembered and how keenly he felt the original. To retort in print he deemed beneath his dignity but to Countess Maffei he confided: "I have read some articles in the newspapers where I've come across big words like ART, AESTHETICS, REVELATIONS, the PAST, the FUTURE, etc., and, I confess, (ignoramus that I am) I understood not a word ... Discussions never persuade anyone ... Opinions are usually fallacious ... if Faccio, as his friends say, has blazed a new trail, if Faccio is destined to restore art, on the altar at this moment 'defiled with the filth of the brothel', all the better for him and the public."

To enable them to express their views more fully, Boito and Praga established a weekly called "Figaro": it lasted three months. Under the pen-name of Almaviva, Boito wrote in drama and opera: some quotations from these articles will serve to outline his own views and help to explain his attitude to Verdi. To achieve its destiny, opera must attain

1. The destruction of artistic FORMULA.
2. The creation of FORM.
3. The actualization of the most vast tonal and rhythmic development possible today.
4. The supreme incarnation of the drama.

[quoted F.W., p.452]

True to the tradition of conservatism, built into the Scala, they remounted Verdi's 'I Lombardi', badly, and so called down upon themselves the wrath of Boito.

"Time has covered it with a first layer of dust and the later discoveries of Verdi himself have revealed to the public the existence of an art more serious, more complete, more true." Then he speaks of composers who have practised a kind of artistic self-destruction over a passage of time "to rise again, more powerful from their own ruins" ...

"Verdi who repudiates I Lombardi with Rigoletto". [F.W., p.452]

Elsewhere he claims Verdi as "a very bold genius, creator, innovator." After Figaro lapsed into oblivion, its directors penetrated the musical Establishment with the foundation of Milan's Quartet Society.

Boito was also a leading contributor to the Journal of this society the aim of which was the systematic introduction of instrumental

music, German music, into Italy. Boito wrote a series of articles on Mendelssohn; the final episode ended: "Mendelssohn died, and the poet has not yet appeared in Germany. There appeared instead a false apostle of this poet, a false precursor, one of those dangerous propagators of truths ill said, ill thought, ill heard; one of those madmen who, with their thoughts on light diffuse darkness; pompous disseminators of clamorous confusion; spoilers of theories by their practice and of practice by their theories; talents more swollen with vanity than ravished with knowledge: Richard Wagner." And later: "Wagner was the Bar-Jesus of art in his day ... We confess that the first words of Wagner moved us ... Wagner destroyed the operatic formula ... Wagner, poet-composer-aesthete, in this triple aspect seemed the man born and predestined to fulfil the innovatory mission. It was false ... His dramas are inept, shallow, ridiculous, in face of the supreme task they were called upon to undertake." [F.W., 454] Another significant point appears in many articles; his admiration for Beethoven. "The Sublime is more simple than the beautiful ... but for the Sublime only the one great form is fitting, the divine form, universal, eternal - the spherical form ... Shakespeare is spherical, Dante is spherical, Beethoven is spherical." [F.W., 455]

Verdi read all these articles as can be shown in various letters to his friends: to Piave, 21 May, 1865: "Don't be scared by the Babel of the Music of the Future ... it had to be so. It was imperative to wash the altar soiled by the swine of the past. They want music that is pure, holy, SPHERICAL. I look upwards and await the star which will

show me where the new Messiah is born, so that I, like the Magi, may approach and adore him. Hosanna in Excelsis." [C.V.2, p.355]

The critical temperature dropped when the young men left with Garibaldi's army in 1866, and it never quite reached the same point again. As mentioned earlier, armistice signed, the roads parted somewhat: Faccio took up conducting; Boito wrote criticisms, short stories and prepared his own opera; Fraga was elected Professor of Poetic and Dramatic Literature at Milan. 1868 saw the first performance of Boito's Mefistofele at La Scala - one of the most resounding failures ever sustained there - and this alone seems to have had a great effect upon its author-composer: youth to manhood in one great step. Suffice it to say a new Boito emerged from the ashes of this production.

This same year, 1868, was also the year of the "Broglia affair". That man, Minister of Education, had written to Rossini asking him to head a commission to take over musical education in Italy, alleging that nothing composed before Rossini and nothing afterwards, was of any significance: "four operas by Meyerbeer". When this became public, Verdi returned the decoration he had just received from Victor Emmanuel and Boito took up his pen to initiate the famous "Letter in four paragraphs" to the Italian press. This missive held up the minister to ridicule before the whole nation with statements such as: "All your Excellency's ideas about language and music are frivolous and fantastic. The language has no need of Your Excellency, and neither has music. With regard to the question of musical decadence, I am in a position to reassure you. Your Excellency should know, first of all that Verdi is alive and well and still writing." Boito the champion of Verdi. The

evidence for the defence has been produced: those like Grout [Short History of Opera] who characterise Boito as the "ardent Wagnerian", do so from no presented evidence. Abraham, [100 years of Music, 182] even dates his real Wagnerian period as after Mefistofele which, after reviewing the facts is simply perverse. The same evidence also exhibits his attitude to Verdi: the poem is the only incident which could really be described as hostile. Elsewhere we see a highly cultured young man, not without his faults, but maintaining a fine, reasoned and well-balanced criticism, generous with both praise and blame.

From this state of affairs we pass to 1869 and see the beginnings of a rapprochement between Verdi and the rising generation. When Ricardi finally persuaded Verdi to return to La Scala in 1869 with *Ferza del Destino* [Verdi had avoided La Scala for upwards of twenty years] the conductor appointed was none other than Faccio who became Verdi's favoured conductor and to whom we are indebted for the final reconciliation with Boito. The struggle to bring the two men together lasted ten years.

Boito had already begun work on *Nerone* which was to last him till his final days, and there is some extant correspondence concerned with Verdi taking over the subject: this was Ricardi's idea. Writing to Verdi [26 January, 1871] the publisher reports that Boito "would consider himself the happiest, the most fortunate of men, if he could write the libretto of *Nerone* for you." This project cannot have appealed greatly to Verdi: to steal another man's work was hardly compatible with the upright character of Verdi. So he avoided making a



definite decision and eventually the subject was dropped. Soon after, he began the composition of *Aida* for Cairo. The Franco-Prussian War upset the date of performance, the costumes and scenery being immured in Paris. In the interval, Wagner's *Lohengrin*, penetrated to Bologne<sup>a</sup>, his first performance in Italy, and Verdi attended.

Verdi put everything he knew into the rehearsals of *Aida* in 1872, the first new work he had given La Scala for so many years, but in reward all he heard were criticisms of the work as Wagnerian, and German. Over and over again in the letters of this period he deplores the ever-increasing Germanic influences being felt not only in art but in every sphere of life. His censures on the press became more and more biting: in particular he detested the growing practice of campaigning for works of art, the publicity stunts, the pretentiousness of the critics and the powers they wielded and abused. It was the Belgian critic Fétis who, as early as 1857, saw in *Boccanegra* an essay at "the music of the future of contemporary Germany". Verdi always denied that criticism of any sort had any effect upon him but we can see from his letters just how vulnerable he was: "to have spent a lifetime in the theatre and end up as an imitator" [to Ricordi, 2 January, 1873]. The harshest of his words in the voluminous correspondence is reserved for the critics, those who "have enough talent to recognise that they have no genius." The Wagnerian charges against him were almost certainly one of the reasons which delayed any promise of new opera after *Aida*.

The Requiem in honour of Manzoni appeared in 1874 and was acclaimed by the whole musical world; Verdi toured Europe with it and

the triumphal reception his work enjoyed helped to compensate for the bitterness produced by the productions of Don Carlos and Aida. It must be mentioned that both these works, Don Carlos and Aida, were successful, Aida particularly so; it was simply the shout of "Wagner!" that wounded Verdi.

A revised version of Mefistofele in 1875 gave Boito a substantial success, but Verdi had returned to his land at Sant' Agata. The efforts of his friends, Ricordi, Countess Maffei and even his wife did not produce any new work nor give any indication that the composer would again take up his pen. References to Wagnerism abound and several times the Ode of 1863 rears its ugly head.

Verdi visited Milan in June of 1879 to conduct a special performance of the Requiem for the benefit of flood-victims. The city put out the red carpet for him and he was most impressed. It was during this visit that the idea of an opera on Otello to Boito's libretto was first suggested by Faccio and Ricardi at a dinner party. Faccio took Boito to see Verdi and three days later, Boito was back with a plan of the libretto.

"The advent of Arrigo Boito was providential, a stroke of Destiny, an act of God"; this from Vincent Sheean [V.S. 269], in a characteristic piece of pretentious phraseology. It gives some idea of the effect Boito was later able to exert on the composer but pays scant attention to factual details. It would be truer to say that the advent of Boito into Verdi's life was cunningly contrived by Faccio and Ricardi; every move in the conciliatory years was only made after Verdi's wife

had intimated that the situation was right, the moment opportune. The composer did not really stand a chance while so many eager heads were planning every operation. Verdi liked the scenario and told Boito to finish it because the result would be good, not because he had decided to set it: "it will come in handy for yourself, for me or for someone else" were his words. An atmosphere of secrecy pervades the letters, although those concerned knew all about the proposed collaboration; Verdi refers to it as "the chocolate", or "the African" and his Fabian reserve would have discouraged a man other than Boito.

Boito had completed the libretto and wanted to take it to Verdi at Sant' Agata. Verdi's wife stifled this idea and the libretto was sent by post. Verdi liked it but new considerations appeared and early in 1880 Verdi went to Paris for Aida, Boito to London for Mefistofele. He had read the libretto but was not very satisfied with the finale of Act III for some unexplained reason, so Boito was asked to revise it. A fortnight later came the new version. Up till now, all correspondence had been routed through the publisher Ricordi which confirms two strong suspicions: first, Boito was still trying to prove himself; second, Verdi was taking great pains to ensure that he did not become irrevocably involved.

A word or two on the first matter should help to clarify the issue. Verdi had few friends and made friends slowly and with great difficulty. He cherished friendship and those honoured with this rare privilege were life-long friends: Countess Maffei, Count Arrivabene, Senator Piroli, his benefactor Barezzi were his extra-professional

friends; his bond with these ceased only as they died. From these, he only demanded what he was prepared to return, a kind of dutiful devotion. An almost fanatical moral rectitude governed his very existence and those in whom he saw the same sense of unwavering uprightness were allowed communion with him. On the other hand, his theatrical friends seemed to offer much more. Maxiani, Faccio's predecessor as Verdi's conductor, betrayed a dog-like devotion. This great man, the first great Italian conductor in our sense [and Wagner's testimony supports this] spent a large part of his time running errands for Verdi; curtain material for the house; magnolia grandiflora for the garden; rifles for the revolution. He defected once, broke his word over Aida which he had promised to conduct in Cairo, and he was banished from court for ever. [There appear to be other, smaller lapses from grace, as yet unexplained]. Muzio, Verdi's one pupil rejoiced in being given any opportunity to serve the "Signor Maestro" [his words]. One tends to sympathise with these men and their fate [there are other cases] but they were highly intelligent artists who never once so much as raised a whisper of objection. There can be only one explanation. The whole personality of the composer inspired such allegiance from his friends in the theatre and the scrupulous, punctilious probity of the man, combined with the genius of the artist, overawed them completely. There is here no trace of the great man "using" others for his own ends, such as we can so easily discern in Wagner's friendships.

Boito had already begun to fall under the spell but Verdi had not forgotten the early transgression. Faccio, recently come-to-grace,

must have prepared the ground with infinite care, but even he could not hurry Boito through the probationary period. We have also seen Verdi's wife planning every move with masterly precision, now encouraging progress, now pausing, now procrastinating, but there is still one more reason for the indecision; the "Wagnerian accusations" over Aida had hurt him bitterly and did not encourage him to undertake new work.

That Boito's libretto had kindled a fire no-one can deny. The composer wrote his first letter since 1862, direct to Boito, querying the finale to Act III, and the effectiveness. "After Otello has insulted Desdemona there's nothing more to say ... Iago gloats, Desdemona laments, Roderigo, a verse, Emilia and chorus, a verse, Otello, mute, immobile, terrible. Suddenly, distant drums, trumpets, cannon ... The stage is invaded by soldiers ... Otello brandishes his sword: 'I will lead you again to victory'. They all leave the stage ... Desdemona, isolated ... prays for Otello." This must have disturbed Boito not a little, but he did exactly as ordered and Verdi was delighted: then, a rare event, he asked Boito's views on the situation.

Boito replied: "Otello is like a man moving in circles under an incubus and under the fatal and growing domination of that incubus, he thinks, he acts, he suffers and commits his tremendous crime. Now if we invent something which must necessarily excite and distract Otello from this tenacious incubus, we destroy all the sinister enchantment created by Shakespeare and we cannot logically reach the climax of the action. That attack by the Turks is like a fist breaking the window of a room where two persons were on the point of dying of asphyxiation.

That intimate atmosphere of death, so carefully built-up by Shakespeare, is suddenly dispelled. Vital air circulates again in our tragedy ... In other words: We have found the end of an act, but at the cost of the effect of the final catastrophe." [Nardi, 469] If I seem to have laboured this point about collaboration, it is only that details have previously been scarce. Luzio failed to include the last letter in Carteggi Verdiani because it conflicted with his view of the Maestro who was never wrong; Gatti says "changes were made in accordance with Verdi's suggestions"; in general, the available picture is erroneous.

Envisaging no hope of new work in the near future, Giulio Ricordi suggested a revision of *Boccanegra*, a luke-warm success and one of Verdi's favourite works. Boito was proposed as librettist, an undertaking which to his eternal credit he accepted. *Otello* slipped into the background. Now the exchange of letters quickens in a constant interchange of ideas which ended with almost a new opera. The production in 1881 was a complete triumph, so much so that at one stage Verdi confided to his star-baritone Maurel: "If God gives me strength, I'll write *Iago* for you." He, in turn, broadcast the news to the world. Verdi had been in contact with Domenico Morelli, the painter, anxious for some sketches of incidents in *Otello*, but these were slow to materialise. Boito was to follow *Boccanegra* with his own *Mefistofele* at La Scala so it was June before *Otello* received any more attention.

The problems outstanding were three: a chorus of homage to *Desdemona* [Act II], the huge ensemble [Act III] and some cuts in *Otello's* part. By the end of June 1881, Boito had remedied the first

deficiency as a letter of 23 June, 1881 proves, and moreover the same letter mentions an interesting point about use of the chorus. Apparently, Verdi had entertained the idea of Otello without any chorus for he writes of it here but calls his scheme "perhaps a crazy one". Boito's patience and devotion were at last rewarded and he was accorded the ultimate approbation of an invitation to visit the composer at Sant' Agata, his country estate. If it were necessary to set a date from which Verdi "contracted" to set Boito's libretto, it would be this, July 1881. Boito, like Faccio, had "come home". His visit to the composer enabled them to settle the cuts in Otello's part, but Boito worked over the third finale in private when he returned home. By the end of August, 1881, the last version of this had been sent to the composer.

More than two years passed and not a note of music was written for which any evidence can be found. There is, however, abundant evidence that Verdi was attending to his land; his was a model estate with every current aid; he superintended the whole undertaking rather as he did an opera. Profit from his many operas was used for land development and it was at this period that he underwrote his first big financial enterprise, the provision of a complete "cottage-hospital" for local inhabitants. All this extra-musical employment does not mean that the opera was forgotten, unless we accept Hindemith's ludicrously naive and rather artless understanding of inspiration. [Hindemith, pp.35-36]. The level of the mind which concerns itself with the planting of Lombardy Poplars and the keeping of meticulous accounts, which busies itself with checking water-levels and schooling horses, is not that which conceives master-pieces.

This time could almost be called the period of inspiration; his best works, his most mature works, had always come out of the solitude of Sant' Agata where he was alone for most of the day. They were not all written there but there they were conceived while he ostensibly succumbed to the tedium of a jejune existence. The long look of introspection yielded its first fruits early in 1884 and he began to compose. The first strokes of the pen were scarcely dry when the thunderbolt struck. Boito, dining in Naples, was reported by the press to have said that he had composed the libretto against his will, but, having finished it, regretted not being in a position to create the opera himself. A quick exchange of letters soon cleared up the matter; the real substance of his speech turned out to be a few informal words with a friend, overheard by an inquisitive journalist and completely misreported. Verdi accepted his explanation at once, but as he wrote to Boito: "the result has been to place a damper on Otello and paralyze the hand which had begun to write a few bars of music." [Copialettere, p.325] "You say 'I shall finish Nerone or I shall not finish it.' I repeat your words with reference to Otello" [ibid]. The situation was, once more, critical.

In an attempt to alleviate a little of the tension, Boito sent him some verses he had composed for Iago, completely original lines. Verdi was won over. These lines became the famous Credo in Act two, but in the same letter which acknowledges receipt of these "powerfully Shakespearean" lines, he begs a little peace, saying "Otello is nervous, as we are - you perhaps more so than I." [G. 291]



The mixing-up of undated and doubtfully-dated letters has completely confused the details of further composition around this time, but, thanks to the late Frank Walker, the position is now clear. [F.W.493]

He dates, quite definitely, three bouts of composition: the first, a very short one March 1884, that interrupted by Boito's after-dinner speech; the main one, after peace had been achieved, was from December 1884 to April 1885; the final one, again short, from September to October 1885. We know that the first bout, already accounted for, was only a tentative effort, and the last episode only lasted about three weeks, so we are confirmed in our view that *Otello*, like the rest of his operas, was born, in outline, of one concentrated effort, five months. The revisions, addition of detail and refinement of certain passages, together with the scoring, occupied most of the next year. The 18th of December 1886 saw the whole score handed over to Ricordi and production was prepared.

From 1879 to the period now under review, Ricordi had hounded Verdi for new works but he was always met with a firm refusal to come to terms. This same attitude of evasion and procrastination caused the consternation obvious in the journalistic world; critics knew nothing and so were forced to invent the details of composition. Most early accounts are based upon evidence which was reported in the press, hence the lack of agreement. *Otello* is the first instance of Verdi taking his time, composing at his own speed, rejecting all offers of lucrative production in Paris and elsewhere, and only coming out into the open when he was perfectly equipped for battle. This was the "first

performance" he had wanted and been denied all his life; everything was the best possible, soloists, chorus, orchestra, conductor and production. He supervised every detail personally. It was unlike anything he had known; the illness which, as with Gluck, had accompanied the preparations of a new score, the constant reconciliation with mediocrity, the suffering of artists' vanity, the interference of critics, were all absent from the production of his lyric-drama.

He returned to Sant' Agata a happy man and settled down to devote his material gains to philanthropic aims. He bought a plot of land near Milan and in collaboration with Boito's brother Camillo, planned a Home for Aged musicians, for those who had helped build his success. His hospital was opened in 1888. He presided over the estate like a benevolent patriarch, happy as a man, contented as an artist. Scarcely a harsh word did he utter now; the "old Bear of Bussetto" had mellowed. He had confounded all his critics by proving that the Italian lyric drama, buried by Wagner, was still very much alive.

With the passing of Otello, much of the dramatic tension which had accompanied its long development also passed out of his life. Boito was now his most cherished friend, dominated by the spell cast by Verdi. No-one will ever be able to estimate just what Boito sacrificed for the "old wizard" as he used to call him; his own distinguished career as a composer was neglected; the only love of his life, Eleanora Duse, was relegated to a subordinate position when the Maestro needed him.

Boito's preliminary sketch of Falstaff reached Verdi in July of 1889 and Verdi was immediately captivated. Letters raced between the

two men. First Verdi approves the plot and offers some further suggestions [6th July 1889]. Next day he cites the objections, age, Nerone, the hard work that would be needed. Boito replies, promising to finish Nerone as well, in a definite time. He waives aside the objections. By the 10th of July, all is settled. They will compose it. A letter of the 11th of July ties up the financial details, [F.W. 497] and the stage is set.

In August, still with only the original sketch to hand, Verdi was already performing his "warming-up" exercises which always preceded a new opera, this time, writing comic fugues. No outsiders knew anything about Falstaff. Boito brought the first two acts to Sant' Agata when he visited in early November, and the other one was ready by March of 1890. The only blot on the landscape was caused by Faccio's illness: he had been forced to leave La Scala and take up an appointment at Parma Conservatory. The easier life did nothing to ameliorate his condition and he was finally confined to an asylum. Boito stepped into his place to earn the necessary money to pay for Faccio's creature comforts, a typical gesture from a life-long friend and an action which Verdi greatly admired.

He had already composed the music for the first act but progress with the second was only slow, so, later in the year, he put aside that part of act two which was causing difficulty, and went right through to the end of the opera; all this, of course, in his usual outline. Nothing further was done for about four months. In this time, Verdi lost two of his oldest friends, Muzio and Piroli and this loss affected him

deeply. Then in June 1891 Falstaff gripped him again and he wrote to Boito:

"Big belly is going crazy. There are days when he doesn't move, but sleeps and is in a bad humour. At other times he shouts, runs, jumps, causes a devil of a rumpus." Boito replied: "Three cheers! let him go, let him run." In July, Faccio died. *Unnecessarily sensational!*

With two acts and a half ready by September, Verdi stopped to complete the orchestration which he was afraid of forgetting. The winter prevented any more work for a while; both composer and librettist were ill. Ricordi was allowed into the conspiracy and began to busy himself with details. He received the first act in August and the third in September, but it is still not known when the first part of act two was written or when the whole act was scored and sent to the publisher. In November of 1892, the individual singers started their rehearsals, and on February 9th, 1893, the curtain was raised on the first performance.

It is often stated that Verdi accepted the libretto of Falstaff without making a single alteration, but this is not quite true. Nevertheless the alterations required were insignificant, words and phrases only, and this is a measure of the new relationship between the two men, reflecting not only Boito's exceptional ability as a dramatist but also Verdi's faith in that ability.

CHAPTER TWO  
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We have already observed the factual landmarks in the collaboration between Verdi and Boito; the reconciliation after many years of misunderstanding, the growing sympathy between the old composer and his young librettist, the mutual trust and confidence of the final years. Already we have some idea of what exactly Boito offered to "the old wizard", his self-effacing devotion, his vast intellect, his own private-life. It is now time to estimate just what was Boito's contribution to these two works.

Mozart called this meeting of a composer and a librettist who knew the theatre "the greatest good fortune". Bellini spoke of a good libretto as "half way to a good opera". Egon Wellesz [Essays on Opera] stresses that the first step to be taken at the Paris Opera before presentation of any new work is even begun, is to present the libretto before the authorities, on the assumption that any composer can write an effective work to a good libretto. Verdi, as early as 1854 was writing in desperation: "When shall we see the poet who will give Italy a melodrama which will be vast, powerful, free from all conventions, something different, something which unites all the elements, but above all, something new." He had to wait twenty-five years for the fulfilment of that hope. It was Gluck who said that <sup>he</sup> forget he was a musician when he began to compose a new work, and, while this is the sort of equivocation which would certainly have impressed his Parisian hearers [those same diletanti who sent Verdi into a rage], it does help to

explain his new approach. It was Verdi's "misfortune" that he could never forget that he was a musician.

I have already mentioned (the fact) that Verdi wrote his best music to his best libretti and the best libretti were those in which the drama was not concealed underneath too many superficial details; in other words, where drama and action did not compete for pride of place. In the early operas Verdi insisted upon a rapidity of action unprecedented in Italian opera and this same wind-of-change carried with it the seeds of weakness; the letters which hurtle across the scene in *Traviata*; the mistaken identities of *Trovatore* and *Boccanegra*; the distractions of *Forza*. It is only with the middle period works, starting with *Macbeth*, that we see Verdi coming to grips with the constructional problems of opera and it is only with the works of the last period that we see a wholly satisfactory solution.

Piave, the perpetrator of Verdi's worst atrocities, had nothing of his own to offer Verdi. His stock reply to anyone who questioned the efficacy of his contribution was: "The Maestro wants it." The very words and phrases he used became models of ineptitude for future generations to peruse and mock. Sheean, in a felicitous phrase, sums him up to perfection: "No more spavined jade ever aspired to Parnassus". And this was the best Italy had to offer.

It would be quite wrong to think of Verdi as waiting for Boito, although most of the biographers do just this. Such an attitude belittles Verdi's genius, exaggerates Boito's, and implies that there is no discernible difference in form between, say, *Rigoletto* and *Aida*.

We know that Verdi had travelled a long distance in twenty years: so did Boito. The operas of Verdi, 1851-71, were Boito's operatic diet. He knew their strong points and probably more important, he knew their weaknesses.

Boito's first task with *Otello* was to reduce the Shakespearean original to manageable proportions. Critics, ever since, have bewailed the loss of Shakespeare's Act I with its "aptness for operatic treatment". This whole act was omitted for the quite simple reason that "the Italians will not stand for five-act dramas, in which we share their taste". [Hanslick, review of *Otello*, 1887]. It would be as well to remember that Verdi always considered his public, those who paid for their witness of his triumphs, to be the ultimate judge of his work. This did not prevent him from questioning their judgment from time to time, notably with *Traviata*, *Boccanegra* and *Don Carlos* [all accepted at a second hearing] but he accepted their hisses on the condition that he did not have to be grateful for their applause: "the box-office is the only infallible thermometer." He also insisted that no act should last longer than forty minutes and worried when one came out at forty-two. Another reason for omitting Shakespeare's Act I would certainly be Verdi's preference for four acts.

Both Verdi and Boito knew their Shakespeare well, Verdi with that deep, intuitive veneration he reserved for the truly great [Beethoven and Shakespeare], Boito with a more perceptive intellectual love. [Beethoven, Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare]. No disparagement of Verdi's regard is intended. His letters teem with references to



Shakespeare and among them is one, significant at this point.

[20 Sept. 1876]. Writing of a "veristic opera" he had seen, he says: "To copy the truth may be a good thing but to invent the truth is better, much better. There may seem to be contradiction in these three words but ask Papa [his word for Shakespeare]. He may possibly have come across a Falstaff, but only with great difficulty would he have found a villain as villainous as Iago and never, but never such angels as Cordelia, Imogene, Desdemona, etc., etc., and yet, how true they are. To copy the truth is a good thing, but it is photography, not art." [Luzio, p.536].

Boito's task was therefore to adapt the Shakespearean original to four acts, to lose none of the essentials of the drama, and, at the same time, produce a libretto in which Verdi was given every opportunity to shine; he did all these things in words which, be they translation or invention, were thoroughly worthy to stand beside the original drama. This, indeed, was the real essence of his part in the collaboration. The very words he offered were something Verdi must have dreamed of throughout his life; gone for ever were the hackneyed words and the effete phrases! His hope had been realised.

None of Verdi's biographers pays any but superficial attention to the interaction of composer and librettist. We are told that Piave's libretti are inept and unworthy of the composer, but never why this is so. Later we hear of Boito offering the composer the two best libretti in the Italian theatre but again no evidence other than the flimsiest is offered. What then are the secrets of co-operation in producing an

opera? The first feature to be appreciated is that there are not one, but two dramatists. The composer himself is a dramatist and he must be such since it is music in opera which carries the drama to its conclusion. Verdi's earlier works exhibit him as composer and dramatist; in fact, in most he is the only dramatist. Piave was so weak as a personality and as a dramatist, that he had nothing of his own to offer. I do not recall a single instance of Piave pressing his point of view. The result of this type of co-operative effort is that the musician-dramatist rules unchecked. Conversely, had Gluck practised his own theory then he would not, could not have produced anything other than recitative <sup>o</sup> secco since the slightest deviation from his aim, the tiniest shred of arioso becomes primarily musical and only secondarily dramatic. The librettist's task is to supply a drama in which a series of events and incidents, related to a set of characters, leads inevitably and logically to a crisis. The "stage", in its widest sense is his business. The musician, however, works on a different plane. His task is to weave a drama from the bare bones supplied by the librettist. He does not visualise the action as a spoken drama, although certain portions are treated as incidents set to music, and these may take place in the same time as spoken drama would occupy. But the essentially musical portions are not governed by any such "rigidity" of treatment. The musician is constantly getting away from the platform he shares with the librettist to a higher level where the drama is played out in music.

Now to our second point. The good librettist appreciates this dualism of opera and works accordingly. His words are not imposed upon

Is recitative more "dramatic" than arioso? They are both "musical". It is a question of which is the better compromise.

the composer, do not attempt to confine him in the earth-bound laws of spoken drama. Rather do they allow him free-flight to his musical fancy but at the same time never allow him to lose touch with his ultimate objective. In the final analysis, it is always the composer who controls the development of the drama and in particular, the speed at which it develops.

I think the Italians are the only people who confer the title of "poet" upon their librettists. Certainly, as E. J. Dent has remarked, the title "librettista" in Italy is treated as a dirty word. We can never accept "poet" as a description of men like Piave. He may have been many things but poet he was not. In any case, the work turned out by librettists is not meant to be poetry. Real poetry has no need of music to give it life but is self-sufficient. Quite the best description of opera libretti is Christopher Hassall's which labels them "incipient poetry". Boito realised this: none of Shakespeare's best lines, his most poetic lines, appears in his libretto. How could one attempt to set to music such lines as: "But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago"; or: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!" Music alone conveys these feelings in Otello.

A good operatic libretto is never complete in itself. Any librettist who sets out to write a drama which is self-sufficient is doomed to failure because he is always attempting to cramp rather than inspire his composer. To describe a libretto as "worthy of separate consideration" as a dramatic poem is still often thought to be the highest meed of praise yet it is only another way of saying the librettist does not understand his job.

The librettist must also show in his work characters which can swiftly, easily and comprehensibly be delineated in music. Obvious differences in the psychological constitution of the characters must be emphasised rather than played-down. This does not mean that we are allowed to see only one facet of any one character but rather that we meet these characters for the first time and can label them immediately with one adjective conveying a world of meaning. e.g. the noble Otello, the innocent Desdemona, the evil Iago.

In addition to the features I have mentioned, the librettist must also view each section with the needs of the composer in mind, remembering that music is always moving from or to a climax. His is the duty to insure that the libretto offers such opportunities and moreover that these climaxes are well-distributed, dramatically effective, and, above all "musicabile". The librettist who is also a musician obviously has a better chance of doing this than a man who knows only the theatre.

Bearing all these points in mind we are inevitably led to the conclusion that the ideal librettist would be the composer. One of Verdi's early librettists actually suggested this in 1849: "If I were not afraid of being called utopian, I would be inclined to say that, to obtain the best possible combination in a musical work, one mind alone should be both author and poet." [Letter from Cammarano to Verdi]. And yet, this is not the case. The composer needs a firm anchor while he is indulging his fancies and that he cannot supply himself. The librettist provides his one link with the evolution of the drama and prevents the composer from flying too high or too often. The good

librettist then offers the composer opportunities to soar high and free into the realms where music alone can convey his drama, but gently guides him back to earth whenever there is danger of him losing his way or, indeed, disappearing for ever. The earlier operas nearly all show instances of Verdi in the clouds, lost; the details of *Forza*, the crowd scenes, for example, become far more than mere details; they become larger and larger, more involved, and less connected with the development of the drama. However satisfying they are, and the one scene where Melitone grudgingly distributes food to the beggars is particularly fine, they are non-dramatic. Of course there is room for the non-dramatic scene in opera but it must not be too long or occur too frequently. Piave, the librettist, whose feet could never have stirred an inch above the ground in his wildest dreams, had no idea how to bring Verdi down to earth.

When we say that Boito was the perfect librettist we mean that he possessed to an extraordinary degree all the qualities mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. But he possessed as well personal qualities which alone can make possible any collaboration such as I have outlined. Firm friendship, mutual respect and understanding, and, above all, a conviction in the value of one's art; these are the features which transform the dream of true collaboration into a reality. Hack-work, the constant alteration of words and phrases, the perpetual crossings-out and re-writings become a labour of love. Boito always had a point of view. This he defended fearlessly but tactfully and, so far as we can judge from letters between the two men, he always won his point. This is the "new" Verdi whom we first see in *Otello*.

Whenever one reads about the libretto of Otello one invariably meets the view that of all Shakespeare's great tragedies this is the most apt for operatic treatment and the reasons usually presented are:

1. The absence of sub-plots.
2. The logical and inexorable progress of the drama.
3. The simplicity of the story.
4. The unusually precise and easily-comprehended characterisation.

etc. etc.

No-one could begin to disagree with any of these reasons but to say that the play is "ideally suited" to operatic treatment betrays a great deal of ex post facto wisdom. Suffice it to say that Boito with all his skill found the task extremely difficult because of the scant opportunities offered for lyrical expression. Some critics, doubtless Boito's superiors, even go so far as to say: "Ideally suited to operatic treatment? Nay, it positively cries out for it." [S.W., p.30]. This same critic denies Shakespeare's Othello the epithet "noble" and describes the story thus: "a hot-blooded hero is hoodwinked by a cold-blooded villain into believing his wife unfaithful, and kills her." Ah, what a synopsis of the finest lyric-drama of the Italian stage! By what superhuman insight has he penetrated to the core of tragedy!

Furthermore, both Toye and Hussey mention that in several places Boito "improved" the Shakespearean originals and they instance the handkerchief-episode between Iago and Emilia and the protracted ending of the play. The idea of Boito setting out to improve Shakespeare could not be further from the truth: Boito was endeavouring to

re-create from the play a libretto suitable for Italian opera. Let us consider what he achieved.

Without any doubt his main objective which would eventually have to justify his work as an Italian opera was to provide Verdi with opportunities for lyrical expression within the drama. These opportunities had to be spread as evenly as possible throughout the opera. Thus we have the drinking-song and the love-duet in Act I; the Credo, the Farewell to Arms and Oath-duet in Act II; the duet between Otello and Desdemona, the Cassio-Iago-Otello-trio and the huge ensemble in Act III; the Willow Song and Ave Maria in the last act. These items conform more or less to the features of the older number-opera and in no way constitute all the lyricism of the score.

Having cut-away Shakespeare's Act I, Boito, as I have earlier stated, prepared to reconstruct the original drama in four acts. His first act begins in Cyprus and progresses in this manner:

ACT ONE Cyprus, a town near to the quayside.

1. Storm in progress: everyone on stage is looking sea-ward, waiting for the result of the battle between them and the Turkish fleet, except Iago who only wants to see the ship-wreck of one particular bark.
2. Arrival of Otello.
3. Chorus of victory.
4. Iago and Roderigo begin plotting.
5. Chorus of Rejoicing.
6. Iago persuades Cassio to drink with him.
7. The drinking song: Cassio becomes drunk and querulous.

8. A dispute ensues; Montano is wounded; Roderigo spreads the alarm.
9. Otello appears to rebuke them: Iago feigns ignorance of the events.
10. Desdemona arrives: Cassio is dismissed: Iago exults: stage is cleared.
11. The love-duet. [Act I, Scene 3 of Shakespeare]

ACT TWO A room in the castle overlooking a garden.

1. Iago plans Cassio's re-instatement.
2. Credo.
3. Otello enters; he sees Cassio and Desdemona leaving the garden: Iago "I like not this".
4. Otello seeks an explanation: Iago arouses his suspicions: he presses his advantage.
5. Serenade to Desdemona.
6. She pleads for Cassio: Otello puts her off: throws her handkerchief aside.
7. Quartet ensues. Otello, Desdemona, Emilia and Iago: Iago takes the handkerchief.
8. Desdemona re-iterates her plea for Cassio: Otello dismisses her and Emilia leaves with her.
9. Otello and Iago remain: Iago tries to "sooth" him and Otello flies at him.
10. Farewell to Arms.
11. Otello demands proof: he flings Iago to the ground.
12. Iago relates Cassio's dream.



13. Iago mentions a handkerchief "he has seen" in Cassio's lodgings.
14. Together they make an Oath of Vengeance.

ACT THREE The great hall of the Castle.

1. Herald announces approach of the fleet; Otello and Iago plot to involve Cassio; Iago departs.
2. Desdemona/Otello duet: he confronts her with infidelity; demands to see her handkerchief; sends her away.
3. Otello alone: "Had it pleased heaven ... "
4. Iago enters; Cassio follows; Otello hides.
5. Trio: Iago and Cassio discuss Bianca; Otello imagines they are discussing Desdemona; Iago shows Otello the handkerchief; fanfare of trumpets; Cassio departs.
6. Iago and Otello plot the death of Desdemona; Chorus heard in distance acclaiming the arrivals of the ambassadors.
7. The Chorus arrives; Lodovico delivers his news of Cassio's succession to Otello; Desdemona still hopes for reconciliation; Cassio is summoned; Otello strikes Desdemona; she falls to the ground.
8. Finale to Act III: Otello clears the stage except for principals; Otello faints; Iago gloats over the Lion of Venice.

ACT FOUR Desdemona's bed-chamber.

1. Desdemona and Emilia are preparing for the night.
2. The Willow Song, and Ave Maria.
3. Otello arrives and prepares to exact a confession; he kills her.

4. Emilia arrives, too late: relates Roderigo's death at the hands of Cassio.
5. Lodovico, Cassio, Iago and the guard arrive: the truth is told.
6. Otello kills himself.

This is the outline of the libretto as finally devised by Boito with Verdi's approval. The score of course is not numbered into sections but this numbering gives the essential plan of the action in the manner in which Boito would have conceived it, in terms of the stage; a new number appears with the arrival or departure of a new character. From this scenario it is possible to follow the drama right through to its conclusion. It is also obvious that Boito envisaged few of these numbers as set-pieces, pieces wherein the action would come to a standstill, although they may be labelled duet or trio. The only set-pieces are the choruses of Act One and the love-duet; in the second is the Credo, the Serenade, Farewell to Arms and the closing duet; Act Three provides only the Finale; Act Four, the Willow-Song and Ave Maria.

The skill with which Boito introduces us to the various characters is worthy of comment. Iago is the first individual to appear and his very first line proves him to be evil. When Otello disembarks in Shakespeare's play Desdemona is present. Boito with that certainty of touch characteristic of a first-rate librettist realised that the first entry of Otello must exhibit his nobility and dignity as a commanding presence rather than his love for Desdemona. So he reserves her entrance till she is aroused by the tumult of the brawl and there he introduces the love motive.

In this scenario we can see how the plot unfolds steadily, how it advances from one climax to the next and how the moments of repose that provide respite from the inevitably mounting tension are so carefully and skillfully placed. Not only is this control over the dramatic tension beautifully managed in the opera as a whole. The same guiding hand governs it through each act, so that there is one moment of high tension in each act; the brawl in Act I, the scene of Cassio's dream in Act II, the Finale of Act III, and the end of Act IV.

This arrangement of scenes with its concomitant distribution of climaxes would be accepted in principle before Boito wrote a single line of verse. When commentators write of Boito presenting a libretto three or four days after the Ricardi dinner-party, they can have no idea of what a libretto implies. The libretto is usually finished when the score has gone to press and not a moment before. What Boito presented to Verdi at this first meeting in 1879 would be some arrangement of scenes like the one I have outlined. He could certainly have managed this in three days. How interesting it would be to hand the play to someone else and ask for a scenario just to measure the result against Boito's achievement! Who would be able to resist the lure of Shakespeare's first act?

Once the scenario was approved the next task was to begin on the verse. We have already seen that this operation was completed in several stages. Boito contrived these verses with astonishing ingenuity like the master-craftsman he was. It is no disparagement to say that he followed Shakespeare closely; many lines are almost exact

translations; the development of the plot is precisely the same. But Boito demonstrated his real genius as a librettist in the places at which he culled ideas from Shakespeare and grafted them with his own. The love-duet at the end of Act I is a synthesis of Shakespeare's Act I, Sc.3 and Act II, Sc.III which tells us virtually the whole history of the love-affair in a most masterly manner. Smaller instances of the same basic technique occur with phrases, single phrases which Boito must have found irresistible. In the play Othello greets Desdemona as "My fair warrior". In the opera she greets him with the same phrase. Shakespeare's hero in Act I begins a speech "Keep up your bright swords ... " When Boito's warrior is roused from sleep he uses a similar phrase as he interrupts the brawl. Then again, on a larger scale, in the whole first scene during the storm Shakespeare's Four Gentlemen are taken over by the chorus.

The portions of the libretto which are vintage Boito are the choruses [excepting the one just noted], Iago's Credo in Act II, the Finale to Act III, and the Ave Maria. Of these the Credo has had to sustain the most vigorous barrage of criticism probably for the very reason that it is Boito's work and not Shakespeare's. The critical excuse usually put forward is that the sentiments this section brings to the fore are not implicit in the original. Toye calls it "little more than the apotheosis of melodramatic villainy". Surely this is not true. Coleridge accentuates Iago's basic characteristic as "motiveless malignity": Lytton Strachey says Shakespeare "conceived of a monster whose wickedness should lie far deeper than anything that

could be explained by a motive - the very essence of whose being should express itself in the machinations of malignity". It would thus seem that these "super-subtle" critics are accusing Boito of being Shakespearean; no greater praise. Toye also records a regret that Iago's suspicions of an intrigue between Otello and Emilia is dropped as a motive in the opera but surely nothing could motivate such evil as Iago embodies. The same critic would have preferred to retain the deadly deduction about the Desdemona who deceived her father being more likely to deceive her husband. I think this inference was abandoned for two reasons; first the incidents relating to this problem [Act I of the play] were not included in the opera; secondly this would present us with a slightly off-white image of her instead of a perfectly white one and bright colours are essential for sharp character delineation in opera.

Undoubtedly the biggest criticism laid on Boito is the rather rapid awakening and progress of Otello's jealousy. We feel, as one critic puts it, "that Otello is only too eager to believe the worse." The feeling arises inevitably out of the elimination of certain scenes in the original and the running-together of others in the libretto. It is certainly the most fair criticism aimed at the opera, but it has nothing, ~~but nothing~~ to do with Boito. Stage-time is the musician's responsibility in opera and the guns should be trained on the composer. I have always felt that this progress of jealousy however it may be criticized is psychologically true for once the seed of suspicion is well and truly planted, the slightest hint of corroboration can send the plant shooting up the heavens. Verdi did not feel this cataclysm of

jealousy quite so acutely as his critics although he felt it strongly enough to make the Serenade to Desdemona into a fairly lengthy interlude to relieve the tension.

Much has been written about the lack of set-numbers in *Otello* and the inference drawn is that this "continuous-opera" is the result of following in the wake of Wagner or the product of a "nuova maniera". Any but the most perverse scrutiniser of the score would see that it is not so much that the numbers themselves have disappeared but rather that the strong lines of demarcation which previously separated the numbers have been systematically broken-down and carefully replaced by cleverly-constructed seams. Concerning the "nuova maniera", it had always been Verdi's practice where the drama warranted such treatment to play a whole scene or act without a break: Act III of *Rigoletto* is a good example. The composer actually wrote to one of his earlier librettists: "No! No! This is no place to stop and sing!" The only set-numbers, excluding chorus, offered by Boito was the love-duet, the Credo, the Farewell to Arms, the Willow Song and Ave Maria; none of these furthers the action of the play but together they embody the drama. Thus the absence of the old set-numbers arises more from the nature of the libretto than from any conscious determination on the composer's part to write the work under a new system.

Still on the subject of set-numbers, it is fascinating to compare Iago's drinking song in the first act with some of the earlier examples in Verdi's work. The brindisi was always a favourite set-piece and several examples spring to mind, notably the one in *Macbeth* and the

one in Traviata. Each of these has a formal introduction and contributes little or nothing to the action or the drama but the brindisi in Otello carries the plot several stages through its development without attracting any due attention: it begins as a toast to Desdemona and ends with Cassio fighting-drunk and creating uproar. This is the easiest and most effective way of estimating progress in operatic development and of demonstrating the individuality of a composer's output. [The usual method, adopted by the superficial critic, is that of finding similar melodic outlines from different, usually widely-separated operas, putting down the examples in print and commenting "Anyone with half an ear will recognise the same mind, the same lyrical impulse behind the two melodies." [-S.W.16] A quick trip through Deryck Cooke's "Language of Music", [an easier journey than through one's own subconscious] and we find that this "same mind, this same lyrical impulse" could only have been Gibbons, or Handel, or Schoenberg or anyone of a thousand, not forgetting Wagner.]

Finally, there is the drama as distinct from the action of the libretto to be considered. Shakespeare's drama became Boito's. It was the character of Iago which most intrigued Verdi, an attraction of opposites, and for a long time he intended to call the opera 'Iago'. He changed his mind after reading so much publicity in the press about his proposed Iago and probably after the real tragedy of the play and libretto moved him to do so. It is fashionable to think that Verdi himself had "no complete intellectual conception of what Shakespeare intended when he created Iago." [Hussey, p.249]. We have seen how it

is still something of a puzzle to many. In default of such an intellectual conception he must have divined the character by truly extra-ordinary intuitive perception. The fundamental truth of Othello is surely the exposition of the fathomless depths of vileness of which man is capable and the consequent peril for any other person who crosses his path: indeed, the more noble the latter happens to be, the greater is the effect of such contact; "corruptio optimi pessima". Yet, in spite of this, man's soul remains invincible; the Otello who has just slain his wife kills himself and the man who commits this act is once more noble. We will see later just how well Verdi understood all these implications. Boito's crowning achievement was that he gave all this to Verdi in words the quality of which compelled the composer in setting them to music to produce a scene that can stand alongside Shakespeare's play without fearing comparison. Even without music, these words, considered as a libretto represent an attainment unique in Italian opera of the nineteenth century, but with music they tower above any Italian opera ever produced.

Perhaps the letter written by Boito to explain the misunderstanding after his dinner party in Naples in 1884 best sums him up as an artist and as a character: here are the relevant passages.

"At the dinner offered me by some colleagues ... a polite journalist ... Signor Caffiero, made this observation to me point-blank: 'Otello would have been also a subject for you'. ... I answered, denying it, added that I had never thought of Otello on my own account, but then, perceiving that to persist in this negative without explaining



it might be interpreted as if I had little love for the theme which Verdi was to set to music, I explained my answer. I said I had never thought of it because I felt too passionately Shakespeare's masterpiece is the tragic form to be able to abstract it into a lyrical manifestation. [And this is true in part] I added that I should never have believed it possible to transcribe the tragedy of Shakespeare into a good libretto before I did this work for you, Maestro, and with you [which is true], and that only now, after many revisions, I saw with satisfaction that my work, begun in great trepidation, came out gifted with eminently lyrical qualities, in forms perfectly suited to musical setting and adapted in every way to the needs of music drama.

" ... my great desire which is to hear, set to music by you, a libretto which I wrote only for the joy of seeing you take up your pen once more on my account, for the glory of being your working companion, for the ambition to see my name coupled with yours and ours with that of Shakespeare and because this theme and my libretto devolve upon you by a sacrosanct right of conquest. You alone can set Otello to music, all the work you have given us in the theatre affirms this truth; if I have been able to perceive the powerful musicability of the Shakespearean tragedy, which at first I did not feel, and if I have been able to demonstrate it by fact in my libretto, it is because I placed myself at the point of view of the Verdian art; it is because I have felt, in writing these verses, that which you might feel illustrating them in that other language, a thousand times more intimate and commanding, the language of sound.

" ... Looks: for seven or eight years, perhaps, I have been working on Nerone [you may put the 'perhaps' where you feel]. I live under that nightmare; on days when I don't work I pass the time calling myself lazy, and on days when I work I call myself a donkey, and so my life runs away while I continue to exist, slowly suffocated by an ideal too high for me. For my misfortune, I have studied my period too much, that is, the period of my subject; and I am terribly enamoured of it and no other subject on earth, not even Shakespeare's Othello, would detach me from my theme; it corresponds in every way to my nature as an artist and to my concept of the theatre: I shall finish Nerone or I shall not finish it, but certainly I shall never abandon it for another work ...

" ... so take up your pen and write to me soon: Dear Boito, do me the favour to change these verses etc., etc., and I shall change them with joy and shall know how to work for you - I who do not know how to work for myself - because you live in the true and real world of art, I in the world of hallucinations." [C.V.2, p.101]

After the altogether felicitous collaboration over Otello, the scenario for Falstaff, when it reached Verdi in July of 1889, was accepted without a single reservation. This shows several marked differences from the scheme submitted for Otello and can best be demonstrated by attempting to reconstruct a plan such as Boito must have formulated:

ACT ONE, Scene 1 A Room at the Garter Inn.

1. Falstaff, writing letters: his henchmen present: Caius arrives complaining about being robbed by them: after much business Caius departs.

2. Falstaff counts his bills: remonstrates on the cost of keeping his two knaves: outlines a plan for getting more money and winning some comely ladies at the same time: his knaves refuse to be messengers: gives letters to boy.
3. Falstaff: monologue on "honour".
4. He dismisses his followers from his service and chases them from the room.

Scene 2 The garden of Ford's House.

1. The ladies discuss the two letters: they threaten punishment to the rogue who sent them.
2. A quartet which heaps insults on Falstaff and promises revenge.
3. The men join in in much the same spirit: Bardolph and Pistol point to the horns which are already beginning to show on Ford's brow: all depart except Nan and Fenton.
4. A short love scene between these two is interrupted by the return of the ladies.
5. The ladies have a plan to send a message by Mistress Quickly: they depart.
6. Another short love scene ensues, this time interrupted by the men.
7. They plan to send Bardolph and Pistol as their messengers.
8. The ladies return cursing Falstaff.
9. They are joined by the men who finally leave.
10. A quartet closes the scene.

ACT TWO, Scene 1 The Garter Inn.

1. Bardolph and Pistol return penitentially to Falstaff.
2. They introduce Mistress Quickly and themselves depart. She delivers her plan whereby Falstaff may meet Alice. He gloats. She leaves.
3. Falstaff alone sings "Va, vecchio John."
4. The "penitents" interrupt with news of another guests: they introduce Ford.
5. Ford explains his desire to meet Alice and enlists Falstaff's help: the latter departs to change for action.
6. Ford's monologue on Jealousy.
7. The two depart for adventure.

Scene 2 A Room in Ford's house.

1. Quickly reports to the ladies: Falstaff is on his way: they lay careful plans: the linen basket is made ready: all but Alice depart.
2. Alice playing her lute receives the amorous Sir John: they are interrupted by Quickly who warns of Ford's approach. Falstaff hides.
3. The men arrive and begin the search for Falstaff: they lock all doors, cupboards and windows and go off to search the house.
4. The ladies conceal Sir John in the basket.
5. Short love-scene, Nan and Fenton: they hide the screen.
6. The men return and start to tear the place apart: a kiss is heard coming from behind the screens: in serried ranks they advance on the screen.

7. An ensemble develops as the men approach the screen and the ladies try to calm Sir John. Nan and Fenton love scene again: Ford throws down the screen to reveal the lovers whom he has forbidden to meet: Falstaff is hurled into the Thames.

ACT THREE, Scene 1 Outside the "Garter"

1. Falstaff recovering from his plunge, discourses on the effects of wine.
2. Mistress Quickly arrives and tries to pacify him: the plotters, male and female appear, to look-on from a distance: Quickly gives Falstaff a letter summoning him to Windsor Forest at midnight for a further assignation: he takes her inside the inn.
3. The ladies and gentlemen come into the open and further plans are laid for the discomfiture of Falstaff.
4. A nonet ensues and all gradually disperse.

Scene 2 Windsor Park

1. Fenton and Nanetta.
2. Alice arrives: she explains the scheme for their wedding.
3. Falstaff appears and tries to make love to Alice: Meg shouts for help as fairies enter the scene: Falstaff hides.
4. Nanetta and chorus of Fairies.
5. Bardolph and Pistol stumble over Falstaff: they all begin to kick and prod him: they curse him and pummel him till he gives in: the necessary disguises are changed. Falstaff recognises his two villains: Ford introduces himself: Falstaff accepts his punishment.

6. The couple about to be married advance and Ford married Fenton to his daughter mistaking him for Dr. Caius. Ford too accepts his fate.
7. Falstaff, maintaining that "All the world's a stage" leads off and the final ensemble.

In many respects the task which faced Boito in attempting to re-create *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as a lyric comedy must have been considerably easier than was the case with *Othello* and chief among these is undoubtedly that the Shakespearean comedy is not surrounded by the same air of sanctity which envelops the tragedy. It is probably for that very reason that Boito's achievement is often under-estimated. The generally-accepted belief is that Shakespeare wrote the *Merry Wives* simply to satisfy the Queen's whim to see the fat knight in love and M. C. Bradbrook [*Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy*] writes that he 'vamped' it in about a month. Like *Othello* before it, *The Merry Wives* was not a subject new to operatic treatment, Nicolai having already set it. One of the earlier biographers quoted by Toye [*Barrili*] states that Boito wrote his scenario in a couple of days after a discussion with Verdi on the subject of comic opera but this information like much of the "contemporary evidence" is quite inadmissible being, as it is, based on nothing but tittle-tattle. We do know definitely that Verdi and Boito spent a lot of time together in Milan that summer of 1889 while the composer was negotiating the purchase of land near the city on which he intended to build and eventually did build "his best opera", the Rest Home for Musicians, and we

also know that comic opera was discussed, but we have already seen from Verdi's reply on receipt of the sketch that Falstaff was a "bolt-out-of-the-blue."

Although Boito was unlikely to run the risk of being charged with sacrilege in dealing with the Merry Wives, we should not be tempted to view his efforts in any poorer light because of that. Indeed, this recreation demanded a much greater degree of skill, sheer technical skill on his part, if he were to produce anything like a compact comedy. We have seen how little he had to cut-away in Otello and what a small amount of Shakespearean material he had to jettison to preserve the distinctive qualities of Verdian opera. The action of Merry Wives compared with the action of Othello is a sprawling, tangled mess, and one can easily appreciate Boito's difficulties. If the new opera were to be called "Falstaff", then certainly his main problem would have to be to build-up the character from the fat knight of the Shakespearean comedy who few would deny is but a shadow of the earthy character seen in Henry IV. Boito, the master-cobbler set to work and by the ingenious technique which had served him so well in Otello, he salvaged pieces from the history play, notably the monologue on honour from Part I, a passage from the hero discoursing on the effects of wine from Part II, and the reference to Bardolph's nose. In this way he managed to recreate a character who comes much closer to the real Falstaff than the one who appears in Shakespeare's comedy.

Next he had to reduce the size of the original to something more suitable for Italian opera, so Page, Evans, Shallow and, most

regrettably, Slender were all eliminated from the sketch. He allowed Falstaff only one visit to Alice's house instead of two, omitting his excursion as the woman of Brenford. Along with the rejected characters disappeared all the local-colour, all the references which make the play so English, but the consequent gain in concentration more than compensates for the diffuseness of the play. The most notable additions he made were the comedy between Ford and Falstaff at the end of the interview, the screen-scene at the end of Act II and the many little changes in the final scene. Also he expanded the small interest Shakespeare had allocated to the love of Nan and Fenton into something which more resembles an important subsidiary plot, but more on that subject later.

Taking all these alterations, omissions and additions into account, we are justified in saying that Boito produced an outline admirably suited to a fast-moving opera because it concentrated on clarity of plot and elimination of all unessential detail. He provided the whole in three acts, each perfectly balanced in two scenes. Each act, too, is nicely balanced with the first scene given-over in the main to soloistic activities and the second devoted to ensemble. This gave Verdi the opportunity of three first-rate finales.

Those whose business it is to understand these things have unreservedly praised Boito for his masterful presentations of Renaissance Italian. Certainly the construction of the ensemble verses alone is sufficient to make the mind boggle: sometimes as many as nine different lines are in simultaneous operation, with never a



false accent nor any apparent straining of metre, the whole impression in performance being a revelation of the librettist's ingenuity.

The chorus appears but twice in the opera, the first time when they accompany Ford on his journey home to witness his wife in Falstaff's arms and secondly in the final scene when the whole village turns out to deliver a stiff lesson to the swaggering scoundrel; both occasions arising quite naturally from the plot. Indeed the restrained use of the chorus is but one instance of the refinement and subtlety which pervade the whole opera. Verdi himself said on occasions that the work was not suited to a large opera-house and at one time he even wrote to Ricordi saying he would prefer the work to be performed at his home at Sant' Agata. [ Some critics have even accepted this at face value: one wonders where he would have accommodated the vast orchestral resources for this 'chamber performance'. ] Of course this was his way of expressing the intimate qualities of the work.

We noticed that the libretto of Otello provided very little opportunity for lyrical expression and that for Falstaff shows a further refinement of the same technique. Not only are the occasions themselves rarer but when they do appear they are invariably shorter and more concentrated. This quality, which may and has been described as a defect, produces a quite kaleidoscopic, almost impressionistic effect with the addition of music, and the listener is caught up in the excitement rather as he would be in watching a film with perfect sound-track shown at twice the normal speed.

The biggest criticism of the libretto is that the action is not cumulative, although in a first-rate performance I have never found this to be true. The tendency is, however, for the action to mount steadily but quickly to the big climax which ends with Falstaff being pitched into the Thames, thus leaving the whole last act suspended in mid-air with no hope of coming back to earth. This does not have to be so and I would venture to suggest that this is only the case when production is basically at fault by not maintaining a sufficiently wide view of the whole opera and instead, concentrating too much on the individual scene; the production which finds in Falstaff himself more of a buffoon than a rogue runs a similar danger. Particularly in the ensemble finales of comic opera does everything depend on the progress of the whole scene, the choice of the exact speed, the right volume, the gradual building-up of excitement, and the precision of entry by any voice in the complex web of sound. A Falstaff who is quarter-of-a-second behind in poking his head out of the linen-basket ruins the whole show, however great he may be. As long as production is geared to accepting the finale to Act II as the end of Act II and not the end of the opera it becomes difficult to maintain that the last act is superfluous.

The charge that can be made to stick is that the whole libretto is built for action which is too swift for any but the musician to appreciate fully. Indeed it has been stated that as an opera it is probably the musicians' favourite [Toye]. Both Boito and Verdi appreciated the speed of the action and for this reason we find the

counter-attraction they presented, the rather idyllic, untroubled, peaceful interludes portraying the love of Nan and Fenton which embody the only repose in this whirl of activity called Falstaff. Stanford put his finger on just this weakness. [Studies and Memories, p.181]

We have seen in these two chapters the part which Boito played in re-activating the extinct volcano which was Verdi after Aida and the Requiem. Had Boito not appeared, it seems highly likely that Verdi would have composed nothing more for the opera house, but the significance of Boito's devotion to the aged composer, both artistically and personally, was something which could not have eluded Verdi. In those days when Wagner and Wagnerism consumed the musicians of young Italy, here was the foremost representative of their number, the oldest of the younger generation, offering himself, heart and mind, to the man who for so many years had stood for Italian opera. While the ill-informed and ignorant hurled cries of 'Wagner' at his latest masterpieces, Boito's devotion was the best means of assuring Verdi that he had not wasted his time composing Italian opera. These two libretti were like petrol to a half-extinguished fire: they enabled the smouldering embers to shoot out flames the height and intensity of which staggered all those who witnessed the conflagration. Most important, the embers were the same; only the kindling was different.

CHAPTER THREE

OTELLO, "THE LYRIC TRAGEDY"

CHAPTER THREEOTELLO, "THE LYRIC TRAGEDY"Otello

The operatic overture was a form which had never appealed to Verdi and in dealing with the form he was usually unhappy. We know, for instance, that he composed a full-blown overture for the first Milan performances of Aida, that this was acclaimed by the orchestra at the dress rehearsal, yet withdrawn by the composer after this very performance. He had composed overtures to some of his earlier operas among which that to Luisa Miller is probably the strongest survivor and that to Nabucco the most typical in that it is of the pot-pourri variety, loosely-built on themes from the opera, pleasant without being in the least distinguished. Usually he was happier when working with the Prelude the purpose of which he considered to be the creation of atmosphere and the presentation of the elements of the drama; the prelude to Traviata is undoubtedly his ~~first~~<sup>finest</sup> essay in serving these two functions and it is as well a good instance of the composer who had earlier treated the orchestra as a guitar coming to grips with a more positive instrumental style.

When one considers the importance of the orchestra in Otello and critics mention the change in style which is so evident to them between Aida and Otello, noting and emphasising the new position of the orchestra in Italian opera, it is instructive to remember that Verdi threw away his most effective opportunity for the orchestra. What an opportunity for a magnificent storm prelude, an elemental picture in

sound! In both of the last works there is no prelude, no overture, no introduction.

Otello, then, begins with a revolutionary step: the curtain opens in the third bar of a terrifying allegro agitato. The island is in the grip of a savage tempest while Otello and the Venetian fleet are grappling alike with the Turkish armada and the full cruel forces of the elements. A fierce chord of the eleventh preceded by a surge of strings and wind, hurls us bodily into the storm. The earth trembles with the pounding of the waves, the wind screams and moans by turns, thunder clatters and lightning cleaves the evening sky. All this is achieved by the simplest means. Three adjacent organ pedals provide the trembling, horns and upper woodwind the gale; percussion the thunder and lightning, the rushing strings helping all departments and emphasising the alarm and virtual chaos which grips the island fortress. The single piccolo from the last act of Rigoletto flashes the same lightning across the lowering sky. [Ex. 1.] Stephen Williams writes of the tonality of this opening scene as "a troubled and flawed F Major" which is not the case. Doubtless he derives the F Major implications from the B flat in the opening chord of the eleventh; had Verdi intended F Major he would have been thoroughly conventional and used a key signature to that effect. In any case, keys are meant to be heard not observed (and C major fits in better with the tonal plan of the section) ?

Full stop here.

Voices of alarm arise from the turmoil almost immediately. Far out into the bay a sail is spotted; as the gale mounts once more, the sail becomes a ship, Otello's ship. Trumpets, cornets and trombones

Falls into same trap as Stephen Williams!

add to the hurricane. Another flash of lightning reveals Otello's standard. A distant trumpet and crash of cannon from the harbour confirm the thought that it is indeed the governor's bark. The accompaniment becomes agitated, staccato strings and wind increase the frenzy of the watchers, Manteno and Cassio shouting reports as the ship is almost overpowered by a gigantic breaker. Yet again the storm gains control: more thunder and lightnings: the feeling of anxiety increases, urged on by the broad vocal phrases of the men watching. The women folk arrive shaking with fear which only serves to increase the tension. Squealing insistent brass press forward to a terrific choral and orchestral climax, "Die fulger della buff<sup>a</sup>ervin" in A minor, the first definite key to be established. [Ex.2]. Yet there is no rest here, and the climax above proves to be the first of many. With febrile energy and passionate intensity, the music surges forward. From a tense, compelling dominant pedal, the tonality is unexpectedly flattened by side-slipping the E chord to Eb which in turn becomes the seventh of a dominant leading to B flat. Iago shouts news to Roderigo but his wishes for the future of the general's ship are not fulfilled. The chorus re-establishes the dominant chord, E major, and holds the tonality there while voices off prepare to help Otello and his men ashore. An inspiring unison shout of exultation (a favourite Verdian and Italian device) re-inforces the G sharp from the dominant chord. The orchestra makes this into a pedal point from which the majestic Otello regally declaims his message to the assembled populace. Using the G sharp as a dominant Verdi coaxes majesty from Otello in ~~C~~ major,

the first definite feeling of a major key in the opera. Otello's recitative is indeed heroic declamation, [Ex.3] a sense of repose, almost a control over the elements exists on his every word, as he gives news of the victory over the Turks. One cannot but be impressed with the presence of Otello: he radiates an arresting confidence that immediately establishes his character to the audience in only twelve bars. Everyone present greets his news with a shout of acclamation, first in E major, then in E minor. [another Verdi finger-print.]

The time signature changes to  $\frac{6}{8}$ , the pace quickens, and the frenzy of anxiety becomes a frenzy of rejoicing after the double bar, key signature of E minor. The sharp divisions into numbers have disappeared for ever in Verdi; the shouts of acclaim which greeted Otello's news of victory are also a transition to the next chorus, so simple yet so subtle is the progress of the music and we glide imperceptibly into "Vittoria, sterminio". The storm is still with us and it occasionally breaks out quite vigorously. Otello and his retinue disappear into the fortress and the chorus gives vent to uninhibited exultation. It is not too fanciful to suggest that the same staccato triplet quavers which the orchestra used in the anxious moments of the tempest are here used in similar groups to portray a very different situation. This chorus is superbly constructed. The words "Vittoria", "Sterminio" precisely matched to the natural musical accent are tossed from part to part in the chorus in antiphonal style, whipped to a little crescendo, seasoned with a deal of distant thunder and lightning [a rush of strings, flash of wind, crash of percussion], two delighted chants of "Vittoria", and



all in six bars. [Ex.4]. The phrase is repeated and the chorus, adopting a more homophonic approach swirls into E major for a short stay, working up to another little climax, urged on by the trumpets and cornets in a brilliant crescendo. More shouts of joy, this time in the tonic major, E, herald the original motive; a final crescendo, thunder and lightning and all is over. Still using the triplet figure, a more restful atmosphere pervades the orchestra. A prolonged tonic pedal on E, a very distant sparkle of lightning, a sigh this time from the spent gale, and we scarcely need the chorus to say "Si calma la bufera".

If I have spent rather a long time on the opening of the opera it was not without purpose. It is quite normal to read of Otello and Falstaff as being new and without precedent. I hope to have proved that while Rigoletto's composer had travelled far, he still had his roots well-grounded in tradition. The storm itself, the constant major/minor shift are both links with the past, links of which Verdi was justifiably proud. Even the skilful transitions which go to make Otello "continuous" are not new. Here, as in Rigoletto and Aida, the joins are as much the result of the inner drama as they are a result of progress and German methods.

According to the best English authority, Francis Toye, the musical characterisation of Iago begins at once in his recit with Roderigo, but we have already noticed that it began during the storm. The sudden side-slip, and flattening of the dominant pedal when Iago sees his master's ship rushing onto the rocks is a musical pointer to the man's character. [Ex.5]. There are many anxious moments during

the storm, but only this receives such harmonic treatment. But suspicions have already been aroused. The characterisation of Iago is by far the most complex in the whole opera, as indeed it must be.

Hanslick deplored Verdi's choice of Otello as subject matter for an opera because of the prominence of jealousy, "a dirty and sticky passion". We have seen how, for a long time, Verdi considered naming the opera "Iago" because he was obsessed by the base malignity of the character, and it was only natural that he should devote his best musical characterisation to this villain who is the prime mover of the drama.

The letters concerning Otello which Verdi wrote to and received from his friend the painter Domenico Morelli and discussed elsewhere are preserved in various books of correspondence. Almost all deal with the character of Iago.

The method of transition to the dialogue is simple but effective. The long pedal E, signifying the end of the storm, and which has already lasted some eighteen bars, is retained till Iago and Roderigo begin their conversation. Although at a first glance this recitative appears quite conventional, a closer scrutiny reveals many little pointers to musical characterisation; the omnipresent triplets, quaver and semi-quaver used to accentuate the false front, the mask of apparent friendship which is Iago. Then there is the rush of demi-semi-quavers at the end of a phrase, in the orchestra, yet another little hint that all is not what it seems. Iago's "Buon Roderigo, [Ex.6] amico tuo sincero mi ti professo", sung 'dolce' as it is marked, captures the mood

*On the contrary - all is exactly what it seems - there is no mystery or hidden meaning - look at the text at this point.*

admirably, producing exactly the opposite feeling - without any help from the silent orchestra - pivoting on the E sharp. Using his final held C sharp as a dominant, the music mirrors Iago's insinuation and we are in F# minor for a little arioso almost a scherzando where Iago promises his aid to help Roderigo win over Desdemona, making light of the difficulties involved. [Ex.7]. The harsh punctuation of the orchestra, the octave leap downwards, followed by a pause, all used consistently before an important phrase for Iago, show how far we have come from the "weak lines of communication" of *Trovatore*.

Meanwhile bonfires have been lighted and as Cassio comes into sight, Iago confesses his hatred of Otello [Ex.8], and names Cassio as the cause of it: more orchestral punctuation and again the rush of demi-semiquavers. The melody embodies all the scorn and hatred which Iago can command, and the words are carefully placed to secure the maximum effect. Chromatics, triplet-groups, the final trill and the octave leaps at the end are all (integral) ingredients in Iago's musical characterisation, and all are present in this one phrase making it a locus classicus. The new figure which follows, played by the violins, serves a dual purpose - the chromatics help to characterise Iago and the semi quavers help the feeling of transition to the chorus "Fuoco di gioia". It is also worth noting that in the last section, although the accompaniment was light most of the time, where the orchestra did come forward to colour the proceedings the dark tones of the bassoons were prominent.

The chorus "Fuoco di Gioia" was always encored in Verdi's time,

and although the encore was an accepted convention, it was rarely demanded for a chorus. Bonfires were lighted during Iago's recitative, and the chorus gradually creeps onto the stage. This is not the highly dramatic chorus of the storm, but a chorus used for a different purpose. After the tribulations of the tempest and the revelation of Iago's dread villainy the chorus here supplies a brief but welcome repose. Toye calls this chorus almost an orchestral scherzo and indeed it is. The virtuosity of the orchestral writing in particular for the woodwind instruments, is indeed amazing, and strongly reminiscent of their treatment in Aida. It is essentially a chorus of rejoicing after the storm and victory over the Turkish fleet. Many points are worthy of special mention; the descriptive orchestral writing pictures the crackling bonfires; the glow of warmth and the sudden surge as the flames leap upwards are admirably captured by the woodwind; the introduction in E minor and the first joyous shout in E major provide a finger-print of the composer. Verdi here wallows in his new-found antiphonal effect, the same mock counterpoint of the storm music; words are thrown about from part to part, with sudden changes in dynamics, then the parts come together in a tide of rising triplets.

The chorus is a three part construction - A B A, in the best traditions of the Italian opera. The middle section centres around the relative major, G major, and there the furious energy abates a little with the result that the return to the first section is even more impressive. Back to E minor and then a key signature of E major, with a beautiful string figuration in a protracted perfect cadence. No

sooner is the major key established than we return to the minor and a long coda - pp with strings and wind rushing along in a light staccato as the fires die down. The whole chorus, certainly more formal than before, bears witness to the composer's consummate mastery of his resources and his technical equipment, a mastery which he had learned thoroughly, the hard way, by cautious experiment and rugged experience.

The vocal figure used in the final cadence of the chorus and the orchestral semi-quaver motive in the same cadence, bridge the gap into the next passage. [Ex. 8A]. Iago is coaxing Cassio to drink but Cassio will have none of it: the orchestral figures continue. When Iago toasts the wedding of Otello and Desdemona, the crowd support him and Cassio's hand is forced. While Cassio extols the beauty of Desdemona, Iago cautions Roderigo that Cassio may be a rival to his own securing of Desdemona, and suggests that Roderigo ply him with wine. All this is done in very fast recitative and from E minor we travel through C, to F to Db where Iago shouts for wine. The D flat becomes ~~C#~~, which in turn becomes part of an F# major chord; the two orchestral motives mentioned earlier [Ex. 9] are combined, give another twist and the introduction to the <sup>b</sup>Brindisi begins. A triplet figure is added, the octave leaps, this time with appoggiatura acciacci<sup>a</sup>tura, and we are in B minor, a strange key for a jolly drinking song.

Tonic and Dominant on lower strings and all four bassoons underline a not-so-commonplace start. All proceeds quite normally till the imperfect cadence at the end of the first phrase: the correct inflexion

of the words cannot be given in  $\frac{6}{8}$  so we have a bar in  $\frac{2}{4}$ . There is Iago's octave leap with a grace note in the voice and in the orchestra, just like punctuation. [Ex.10]. On to the relative major goes the next phrase. Cassio joins in, glass in hand, and in jerky rhythm showing his intoxication, he takes us to the dominant of the relative major, A major. [Ex.11].. Iago attempts to round off the verse in a more jovial manner, but the shake is still there. A superbly written chromatic cadence completes the verse; down to mezza voce, the major turns minor, loaded with chromatics, then a wonderful recovery in true drinking-song spirit to a perfect cadence to A major, where the chorus joins in. Even in their line, Iago is not silent. There is a sudden hush and his cadence figure comes through. [Ex.12]

No one seems to have noticed the inherent homogeneity of Iago's music beyond the features of characterisation I have already mentioned. The main vocal figure of the drinking song corresponds in more than outline with several that appear later in the opera. It is identical in spirit and helps a great deal in achieving that unity which is the supreme prerogative of true genius in music. A few examples chosen at random will serve to illustrate the underlying unity of the creation of Iago's music.

Example No.13 is the vocal phrase which opens the drinking song.

Example No.14 is the phrase to which Iago adjures Otello to beware of jealousy.

Example No.15 is a phrase from the Credo in Act II.

Example No.16 is the scherzando phrase used by Iago early in Act I.

The essence of this unity of inspiration with regard to Iago is the melodic progression lower dominant to tonic to minor third and back. The minor third is vital material and any number of phrases can be abstracted from the opera to illustrate its importance; usually there is an even progression from tonic through supertonic to minor third but on the return journey the supertonic note is treated as an appoggiatura. In fact this is the turn which is such a characteristic feature of Iago's music. At one moment it is played out in augmentation as in the warning to Otello, at another it is treated orchestrally as a motive to be developed as in the opening of Act II. [Ex.16A].

The joining of the verses again exhibits a great skill. One cannot help recalling the brindisi in Traviata and drawing a comparison; how refined is the same Verdi three decades later! Iago and Roderigo exchange views on Cassio's condition, Verdi and Boito always insistent on preserving the dramatic motive behind a "set number". The second verse looks and sounds very like the first but it is not so. A new accompaniment emerges - strings have a shake - low woodwind a triplet figure and horns in the middle a drunken, syncopated rhythm which again draws attention to Cassio's worsening condition. After the same chorus and the same interlude we begin the final verse - again with a varied accompaniment. The original figure from the transition to the brindisi comes back in strings and low woodwind, plus timps and bass drum on alternate beats.

With a flash of inspiration from Verdi, Cassio cannot wait his turn, but crowds on Iago's line, producing a stretto effect which

steadily increases the tension. The chorus changes to laughter. Cassio is urged on further by this - even starting too high and forgetting the music. Beneath all this, Iago plots with Roderigo to enrage Cassio and then pick a quarrel. Again Cassio tries to remember his part but the chorus scornfully deride him. After some riotous merriment in the high woodwind and strings, laughing at Cassio in company with everyone else, we are suddenly back to the chorus key of A major. Before the orchestra has time to round off the hilarious proceedings <sup>o</sup> <sup>a</sup> Manteno arrives for Cassio.

*still!*  
This join exhibits once more a stylistic feature which is very common. The key was A major. Manteno picks out the third and this in good time proves to be the dominant of the new key F# minor. Shakes and triplets forge a link with the past. Iago explains to Manteno that this is Cassio's habit, Roderigo laughs in Cassio's face - Manteno intervenes as the brass chords (triplets again) gain in force and intensity. Iago speeds Roderigo round the town to spread alarm as Manteno and Cassio draw their swords. Iago now attempts to restore order as the full force of the whole orchestra erupts at his efforts. Finally when chaos ensues he sounds the alarm.

There is a superbly theatrical climax as Otello rushes out to demand an explanation; taking the tonic note of the old key, F#, he transforms it into the leading note of the dominant for the new key of C. [Ex.17]. The effect is crude and harsh, but intentionally so. In more of his fine heroic declamation, Otello rebukes the populace for their behaviour and calls on Iago for an explanation. The latter



begins haltingly, simulating abject remorse that he should even have been present: he can give no secrets away, it happened so quickly and unexpectedly. All is perfectly translated into music; Cassio's genuine distress, Iago's feigned ignorance and Otello's rising impatience. The final straw is the appearance of Desdemona, roused from her slumbers by the din. Without more enquiry Otello deprives Cassio of his command and sends Iago to quieten the town, himself clearing the outside of the fortress. Underneath this a new phrase has already appeared in strings, horns and some of the woodwind. [Ex.18]. One cello takes it over, and we move from F major to a dominant chord in Db adding three more cellos, all muted, in a very tender phrase. [Ex.19].

The love-duet can only be called a duet in the loosest sense of the word, the two voices only coming together on two occasions, at important cadences. It is difficult to describe adequately the effect of this duet: Toye calls it "melting tenderness", Hussey "felicity unalloyed" which has a regrettable Gilbertian ring, and further says "not the first rapture of lovers' meeting but the settled calm of a deep mutual adoration." It is all these and more because it is so different from any of the other love music in the earlier operas. Here, no hidden danger lurks, no shady secrets are concealed; there are no suppressed or partly suppressed emotions. The situation is transparent and beautifully sincere.

The first part of the duet serves as an introduction to the duet proper: the four muted cellos with their close chromatic harmony

radiate a glowing passion as Otello re-affirms his love. Such is the pervasive tranquillity that we know it can only be a re-affirmation. Desdemona replies, with the high strings as a background. Her first words "Mio superbo guerrier" are those used by Otello when he meets Desdemona at the harbour in the original. "Oh com'è dolce il mosompare insieme", says Desdemona. An unprepared C major chord, sustained by strings and woodwind over a harp arpeggio, and Desdemona asks Otello "Te ne rammenti?"

The duet-proper follows: even though the prevailing mood is one of tenderness, none of the other characteristics of Otello and Desdemona is allowed to slip by unobserved. Now in F major, with a light accompaniment of woodwind, cor anglais, cellos, basses, and a sustained horn part marked ppppp, and harp arpeggios, Desdemona begins a review of Shakespeare's Act I. What artistry from composer and librettist! To cut away a whole act of Shakespeare, and yet to cloak its salient points under the guise of a love duet argues an extraordinarily deft craftsmanship. The actual melody is constructed from the transition to the love duet, the first figure to be taken over by the solo cello. [Ex.20]

When Otello mentions the "clash of arms", the accompaniment deftly illustrates the reminiscence. Hushed trumpets, cornets, high woodwind and timps, re-inforce his character as a warrior in a firm and solid C minor, so controlled that we never feel we are drifting from the dramatic motive of "melting tenderness". As Desdemona describes the shining deserts and the burning sands the accompaniment changes again through Ab to F minor, shimmering strings, flute and cor anglais depicting the scene.

Otello takes over and restores the prime objective in phrases of moving intensity in D flat major. The climax of this section is reached on the words "E tu m'amavi per le mie sventure ed io t'amavo per la tua pietà", Shakespeare's "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd

And I lov'd her that she did pity them"  
on a typical Verdi phrase, an undecided major/minor feeling translated into pure melody. [Ex.21] Together they close this section in F major.

The arpeggio figure re-appears, this time on the clarinet, fusing together the sections: the subtle reminiscing is over and we are back to Shakespeare's Act II, Scene 1:

Otello: If I were now to die  
T'were now to be most happy: for, I fear,  
My soul hath here content so desolate  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.

Des.: The heavens forbid  
But that our loves and comforts should increase  
Even as our days do grow.

Otello: Amen to that, sweet powers.  
I cannot speak enough of this content;  
It stops me here; it is too much of joy.  
And this, and this, the greatest discords be  
That 'ere our hearts shall make!

Boito and Verdi here, as throughout, have captured all the enchantment of the original. In fact it is as near as possible to the original. The setting of the words is so perfect, the accompaniment so complete that comment is unwise. The germ of it all is the arpeggio figure and the transition motive. [Exx.22 & 23]. How sweet is the

repose of "Amen, risponda la celeste schiera"! From the C major of Desdemona's reiteration of this, by means of a diminished seventh ("that rack and refuge of us all who cannot write 4 bars without a dozen or more of them) we slip into E major as Otello sweeps Desdemona into his arms and kisses her once, twice and three times, while the orchestra seethes with emotion. This important moment is very memorable, and creates to my mind, the most perfect image of mutual love in opera. Again the arpeggio figure appears, the music moves effortlessly into D flat major, Otello and Desdemona move slowly towards the castle in a fond embrace, imaginatively captured by a shimmering accompaniment. The curtain falls as the four cellos from the beginning of the duet repeat Otello's first phrase while two violins hover on the tonic note and the harp, with a descending arpeggio, creates a final air of serenity. Throughout the whole duet, the music for the voices is a fine mixture of recitative and arioso, in this instance more arioso, a model of the vocal style of late-Verdi, not revolutionary but evolutionary. Aida, while it embraced most of the seeds of the "new style" - seeds incidentally which had begun to germinate as far back as Rigoletto - was in every way, the zenith of the number opera. Aida looked to the past, glorified the present, and foretold the future of Italian opera, but in Otello, the greatest concession Verdi allowed himself was a very occasional backward glance. Whatever he deemed fitting, he retained, but only if it fulfilled that condition.

Act Two opens in a ground floor room of the castle. With the first phrase of the orchestral introduction we sense that the calm

serenity of the last duet is far away. The music is caught up once more in the evil machinations of Iago's mind: the orchestration and the reiterated triplet turn tell us that much, and more. By a skilful shading in the orchestra, the evil theme is given a major twist at the cadence each time, thereby to my mind, accentuating the two-facedness of Iago, the real corruption which is Iago, and the brash, bluff friend as he appears to everyone on the stage. [Ex.24].

As the curtain rises, Iago is offering to help Cassio regain the Moor's esteem. The melody follows every turn of test and character: the affected flippancy with which he tells Cassio not to worry "Non ti crucciar": the conspiratorial air he adopts when he confesses that Desdemona "is our leader's leader", rather like a child with a great show, telling another what he already knows.

Cassio departs leaving the stage open for Iago's "Credo".

A study of the actual words not only emphasises their Shakespearean quality but also accentuates the profuse technical difficulties in even attempting to set them. In the strictest sense of the term, the Credo is still a set number, however cunningly the joins are concealed. The music is the embodiment of all the features of Iago's music so far. The triplet turn, the octave leaps, the characteristic orchestration, the explosions in the orchestra, and all the turns of melody. It is easy to relate the thematic material to what has gone before.

As regards new material we now have a kind of motto theme in which the falling minor sixth is prominent, played on all strings, woodwind and brass, unison and double forte. [Ex.25] This is the

first opportunity Iago has had for coming into the open and revealing his secrets to the audience which doubtless dictated the broad, sinister, blood-curdling theme. Amid an ever-changing accompaniment Iago declaims his creed; first with double shakes on clarinets and violas, then with oboes and bassoons and timps. In particular the forte shakes for the double reeds low in the register sound almost like a snarling, and produce a really macabre and gruesome effect.

The text is not split into verses, yet Verdi avoids the effect of rambling incoherently by a judicious use of the motto theme. To join the first section to the second he repeats the motto theme above, in the middle of which Iago roars confirmation of his villainy. Violent contrasts in dynamics underline his every thought. The first two shouts of "Credo" are in C, and then we see another example of Verdi's craftsmanship which served so well in Aida. At the point where Ramfis accuses Rademas of perfidy, he does so three times, each time forcing up a semitone to heighten the tension. Verdi does the same here: from C to Db and finally to D. Then there is a sudden halt to the proceedings where Iago examines the end of life on earth, the intolerable thought of rotting in a grave with the feeling translated to a shuddering orchestra. The motto reappears, quietly, and humanised now. At the mention of the word "death", there is a hallow, sepulchral tap on the bass drum, then more of the motto, quieter still as Iago asks "What, then", and again, as the motto gets shorter and shorter, quieter and quieter. "Death is delirium"; this almost in a whisper with no accompaniment. Then with an explosion in the orchestra, a roll on the

cymbals, he declaims with almost maniacal glee "E vecchia fola il Ciel". As the orchestra manufactures yet another figure from the ubiquitous triplet, [Ex.25] all is over and we are almost into the next section.

The falling triplet figure of the cadence becomes quite naturally the next invisible transition: the triplets become ordinary quavers, and the emphasis shifts to second and fourth beats of the bar which produces a bustling figure on all the strings, very similar to the one used by Iago just before the Brindisi in Act I. [Ex.26] This time it jostles along, quietly as Iago spots Cassio and prays that Desdemona may appear. The figure in the orchestra helps to illustrate the satanic glee in Iago as he sees his scheme coming to fruition. Once Desdemona and Cassio meet, Iago longs for Otello to enter as the bassoon joins in a figure created from the earlier figure in this section. [Ex.27]

As Otello approaches the mood changes, the bustle in the accompaniment disappears and a horn figure pp seems to presage his entrance. The music makes for D major, as Iago, feigning not to have seen Otello, and pretending to be thinking aloud murmurs "Ciò m'accora". From the innocence of the phrase we know that we are once more back with the false front of Iago. When questioned on his remark by Otello, he passes it off "Nulla ... voi qui?" and Otello seems satisfied. Otello sees Cassio leaving Desdemona as he arrived but Iago denies it. "Cassio? no ... quei si scesse come un reo nel vedervi" - "He started like one guilty on seeing you", and the first seeds of suspicion have been planted. Ensuring that he keeps the initiative Iago asks in a very

characteristic phrase "Did Cassio know Desdemona in the first days of your love?" Round two to Iago! [Ex.28]

Again Otello questions his remark, and Iago passes it off in another touch of scherzando melody. However Otello is not going to be put off so easily this time: Iago insidiously repeats his every inflexion and Otello demands an explanation upon Iago's loyalty. Iago affirms his loyalty in characteristic manner, but is still content to make only vague insinuations; "Beware, my lord of jealousy", this to the accompaniment of strings, wind and brass, all following the chromatic melody pp, a very weird effect. As Iago continues his admonition to Otello we reach one of the best known passages of the opera, often quoted as evidence of Verdi's Wagnerian pretensions, and called "the jealousy motive". The theme is used again as the introduction to the third act of the opera, and therefore it must be a "leit-motif". So intent have some critics been on finding a "motive" that nobody, in defence of the theory or in opposition to the theory has noticed its true character. [Ex.29] It is only the old triplet turn in augmented form. However the section is more important as a piece of wonderful characterisation than as a "motive" of any part. The words are perfectly placed for correct accentuation: merely repeated without music, they sound frightening.

~~E m'idda fisca, lirida, cieca, oel sua veleno se steese attesa.~~

~~Vioida piazza lo squarcia il seno~~

See Ex 29 for correct words.

A unison accompaniment is provided on cellos, violas, and of course, bassoons, clarinets and oboes which at the end of the phrase again play the fiendial shake.



After such a phrase we have no doubt that Iago is master of the situation; the brass, used throughout to symbolise the dignity and heroic stature of Otello, wavers momentarily in syncopation, but he regains control and demands proof "Otello has his supreme laws". Iago, with dire cunning, says he cannot furnish proof, but he bids Otello watch his wife very carefully and search for both confirmation and refutation of his suspicions.

Before the start of this warning, the chorus has started to drift onto the stage and has begun a serenade to Desdemona, another concession to convention, but, executed very skilfully, since the serenade is under way long before Iago's warning to Otello is finished. As Toye says, this is the "most musically uninspired" movement of the whole opera. It was included by Verdi to break up the long succession of duets which form the second act of the opera. However, musically important or not, it is dramatically justifiable. As an intermezzo, for what else could the serenade be, the section is quite successful, and to my mind, does provide the necessary relief, a relief from mounting tension and too much dialogue. If the musical conception of the serenade is not inspired, the method of beginning it certainly is, for it is started before we know anything about it. Previously in the opera we have seen many examples of the composer's craftsmanship in joining one section to another, but this is the first occasion we have met with an overlap. To have joined two sections here, would have sign-posted the serenade, and stopped Iago in his tracks.

By the time that Iago has finished his warning to Otello, the

chorus is assembled in the garden and the serenade has begun. It is a well rounded construction for the chorus and it falls easily into sections and keys. The first section is sung by the whole chorus over a simple tonic-dominant accompaniment reminiscent of the "bad old days", but with an individualistic arpeggio accompaniment from 1st violins in E major. The second section is perhaps more interesting. In the sub-dominant, A major, rather an unusual first modulation, a group of children introduce a new melody while the rest of the chorus provide a rhythmic accompaniment aided by Cornamuse , Mandolin and Guitar. Next, another new melody, sung by sailors in the dominant, B major, and the remainder of the chorus provides sustained background to another varied accompaniment. A further episode is introduced in the mediant minor G , sung by women's chorus, an orchestral-like accompaniment from the rest of the voices and more variations from the instruments on the stage. A final modulation to the tonic brings back the orchestra and a return to the first choral section.

As a coda begins over a sustained tonic pedal, Desdemona echoes the first melody, Otello is visibly and audibly moved by the situation and Iago makes derisive comment. The chorus prepares to leave and Desdemona kisses a few of the children, distributes some money to the islanders, and as the serenaders depart, she enters the room followed by Emilia.

Immediately she begins the first of her ill-timed pleas for Cassio's reinstatement with a melody which typifies her open, ingenuous nature. [ Ex.30 ] Again the accompaniment reflects the harsh change of

sentiments, from Iago's base deceit, Otello's fast-increasing suspicions, to the smooth, mellifluous string melody and sustained woodwind supporting Desdemona. It reminds one of the love-duet, but at this point the music is more individual and speaks only Desdemona, an image in sound which we have hardly met so far.

Verdi's first task here is to draw Desdemona in the flesh, musically. We have already seen a fine picture of the demon Iago, we know a good deal about Otello, but Desdemona is still a relatively new character. Otello twice interrupts her pleas for Cassio with a curt "Non <sup>ora</sup> più". To Desdemona who senses the rising anger of his voice, he feigns "a burning of the temples". The genuine distress of her melody is obvious as she attempts to bind his brow with her handkerchief, only to see it cast to the ground in a fit of temper. Desdemona, astounded by the recent turn of events, confesses her amazement in a beautiful cadential phrase, [Ex.31] and begins her own plea for forgiveness of some unknown sin. [Ex.32]

Almost without noticing it, we are in the famous quartet for Otello, Desdemona, Iago and Emilia, and the key is Bb. Every shade of sentiment is faithfully portrayed as one might expect from a composer who had always excelled in this form. This is another example of what Hermann Rutters admirably christened "dramatic polyphony" when speaking of Rigoletto. Both orchestrally and vocally the quartet is fully worthy of the composer of Rigoletto. All the characters are clearly differentiated in the music: there is the tragically abased Desdemona, the recalcitrant Emilia, the mistrusting Otello and the

malignant Iago. Vocal and orchestral artifice combine to show all this at once. We have the sustained woodwind for Desdemona, the disturbed strings for Otello, a rapid, arpeggiated woodwind figure for Emilia, and the ominous chromatics of the bassoon for Iago.

During the quartet, Iago compe~~ps~~ his wife to give him the handkerchief which Otello casts to the ground. As Desdemona's voice rises in a fine plea for pardon, Otello asks to be left alone; first Desdemona's theme from the quartet and later his own snatches of his music merge into a transition. His theme, incidentally, is very similar to the fate theme from *F<sup>a</sup>rza del Destino*. [Ex.33]

The insistent bassoon warns that Iago is still present, and this feature, together with the violin motive above serve the orchestral accompaniment, while Otello tries to reconcile his love for Desdemona and her apparent misdemeanours, and Iago, wallowing in this newly-stirred filth, looks on. Finally, his calculated injunction to Otello, [Ex.34] proves to be the last straw. As the elemental force of Otello's rage is released momentarily, the orchestra, particularly the brass, goes b<sup>r</sup>eserk. We can feel the anguish and pain in Otello's "M'hai legato alla croce" [Ex.35] in the appoggiature. A superb piece of melodic declamation, the section is in F minor and again, as we have so often observed, it is held together by an ostinato figure in the bass, an old compositional device which here pushes the music forward relentlessly. With another moment of brass frenzy we reach one of the pieces which is usually abstracted for concert consumption, Otello's "Farewell to Arms".

Although more formal than the preceding section, it can still in no way be termed an aria; it is over and done with, in the time the orchestra would take over an introduction to an aria in one of the older operas. The rage has gone out of Otello, and he attempts to take a cool, unimpassioned gaze at his future. The melody, much more formal and four-square is admirably suited to the warrior's sentiments it portrays. The piece falls easily into two short sections, almost like verses. More interesting by far is the orchestral accompaniment; two harps and lower strings at first, of which the string figure is worthy of note because of its later use. [Ex.37]

The second section uses trumpets and cornets to play quiet fanfares while trombones, bassoons and timps supplement the harp chords in Cb. The ending of this is probably the most formal and conventional in the whole opera, and this makes the subsequent transition more difficult. However Verdi takes up the string figure and weaves an ever tightening web of expectation as Otello seizes Iago demanding proof of his insinuations. In a moment of uncontrolled rage he throws Iago to the ground. Iago ironically invokes heaven's aid for himself and Otello. As Iago makes to go, Otello restrains him.

As Otello tries to reason with himself, the play of his emotions comes through in his melody and in the orchestra, the bursts of anger, at his suspicions, smooth gliding when he doubts these suspicions. His world is beginning to crumble beneath him and the suspense as Iago asks if he wishes ocular proof of Desdemona's infidelity is electric, one shaking flute and later a piercing oboe note. Some devilish plot

is being hatched in Iago; the insinuating melody returns, and the music becomes more gripping as it is forced higher and higher by a single sustained horn, as Iago mercilessly prepares to relate Cassio's dream.

This portion of the opera has always been singled out for special praise because of its perfection in every way. Every commentator has mentioned it at some time. Even Hanslick, not famous for his unrestrained admiration of novelty, remarked favourably on the beauties of this section. This is surely one of the most difficult tasks which face a composer of opera, to attempt to put someone else's words onto another character's lips and not to relate facts, but to capture the effect of direct speech. No superlatives of praise could overrate this masterful narration of Cassio's dream. Every accent of the words falls into exactly the right place in the bar. [Ex.38]

Not  
remarkable  
sarcasm!

The solo horn in the preceding passage has already paved the way for something spectacular. First he relates the circumstances over a muted string accompaniment. When he comes to Cassio's words, the accompaniment is sustained woodwind chords: "Heavenly ecstasy fills me through and through" exhibits a chromatic sliding of tremolo strings and woodwind to emphasise the rapture of the dreaming Cassio. The final phrases of this wonderful miniature have never been surpassed in Italian opera. [Ex.39]

We know at once that the dream is over for the savage emphasis on "Mero" is the refinement of verbal and vocal cruelty.

At the end of the dream, Otello is more than half-convinced of

Desdemona's guilt, but Iago, playing honest-broker, restrains him by pointing out that more evidence is needed. Paying particular care lest he lose his advantage, Iago, still using the string figure of his earlier narration, mentions yet another scrap of evidence, just in passing. The magical horn note returns. Of course Otello knows of the handkerchief; was it not his first love-token to Desdemona? Iago, as if hesitating to broach the subject of new suspicion, continues in halting recitative; oboe, clarinet and bassoon underline his parenthetical "certo ne son", "lo vidi in man di Cassio".

The anger of Otello, so well restrained by Verdi in the preceding calumny, breaks out afresh and knows no bounds. Aply assisted by ugly, syncopated brass, the Moor loses all control as he howls for vengeance. Dyneley Hussey goes to some length to point out that the ugly moments of the brass writing correspond exactly to the ugly moments of Othello's poetry in the original, and far from being bad writing for brass, these moments are intentionally crude. When the noble Moor loses his self-control in the play, he can only rave of "noses and ears", "goats and monkeys", phrases which are far removed from his usual speech, "cyclopean blocks of some precious marble". By the end of this transitional section, constructed round another plastic string motive of continuous triplets, Otello howls for blood. [Ex.40]

Regaining some of his lost composure he begins the greatest of Verdi's tenor-baritone duets, swearing revenge for the dark deeds of infidelity. Of the ancestry of this section, there is no doubt for it can be traced as far back as one is prepared to travel. Perhaps its

most direct and closest relative was the similar piece in Don Carlos: to confirm this one needs only to look at the two melodies, one from Don Carlos and the other from Otello. [Ex.41]

This gives us yet another opportunity to gauge the composer's natural evolution, similar to the comparison of the Forza theme and its counterpart in Otello. In both cases the later motives are ~~more plastic~~, *Overdone, some what!* more pliable, ~~more malleable~~, in fact, more capable of musical development. The tenor-baritone theme from Don Carlos is more four square: the minim at the beginning of the  $\frac{4}{4}$  bar seems to rest rather than press on, and the triplets alone exhibit any constructive energy. But in Otello, ostensibly the same type of motive in a triple measure seems to push forward constantly, rather like an avalanche. The distinction is obvious, and both show Verdi's indebtedness to Meyerbeer. [Ex.42]

Again the compositional method is construction from a motive and everything is organically related to that motive - both vocal and instrumental lines. Three sections and a coda make up the units of the section, the first in which two voices have sung together in the opera for any length of time.

First Otello, in the dignified declamation which throughout testifies to his noble nature, swears "By yon marmoreal heaven" to set things to right. He who had howled for sanguinary vengeance, now proposes just retribution and nothing more. It is melodic declamation in strict time, which takes Otello right through his vocal range - from a low ~~C~~ to a high Bb. The orchestra has the motive in its original state while the voice is content to use snatches of its rhythm and occasionally



of its melody. As Otello makes to rise from his knees, Iago bids him stay and kneels alongside him, pledging his being to aid the wronged Otello. Iago takes over the original melody aided by one <sup>s</sup>basoon, one horn and the bass clarinet, with a falling chromatic figure in the strings, and timps on the second beat. At the climax of Iago's verse there is an upward chromatic sweep of violins and woodwind taken up in a semiquaver run of all three tenor trombones and then the two voices end together, each with his own melody as in their separate sections, with a full orchestral accompaniment. At the end of this there is no long coda as appeared in earlier pieces of this type: after one final supplication to the God of Vengeance, unaccompanied this time, the orchestra brings down the curtain in fitting style.

This was yet another touch of felicitous theatricality on the part of the authors. I think it is fair to say that such moments are successful in inverse proportion to the frequency of their use. As the number of these moments grow, so their effect diminishes. The huge operas of Meyerbeer teem with such flashes of undiluted theatricality, and while only the bigoted would question their individual effectiveness, the overall result suffers. The earlier works of Verdi are well-filled with such artifice but as the years passed, the moments, like the very operas, became more rare. Of the relatively few in Otello, this is not the most effective, but it certainly offers a splendid climax to the second act, more effective because it is the first of such moments.

The main melody of this movement is in point of fact a direct descendant of a style Verdi had found in Meyerbeer and which had suited his purposes admirably; the basis of the type is the juxtaposition of dotted rhythms and triplets which is so common in Meyerbeer's operas, and which can be described as self-generating. Although the effect quickly becomes tedious and is easily abused, it is certainly capable of securing a 'forward-motion' in the melody. Here we see it in its refined state where the sharp corners have been smoothed down and we are left with all the good points and none of the bad.

The third act, as contemporary critics soon found, was the most complicated, and the most difficult to understand, or as Toye says "difficult for digestion". The reason is, I am certain, that the act covers a great deal of ground, more so than Act I or Act II. Although the whole act lasts about the same length of time as Act I and II, it contains the long, complex duet between Otello and Desdemona, the scene where Otello witnesses the dialogue of Cassio and Iago, and the magnificent choral edifice which brings the act to a close. Coupled to this there is the fact that there are so few "signposts to the old school" in this act. In the first act we had the choruses, the drinking song and the love duet; in the second the Credo, the serenade, the quartet, and the final duet. However, in the third we have to wait right till the end before we come across anything as conventional as those sections of Act II. It was Verdi's most difficult act as well. Here he must find a permanent solution to his problem, the problem of opera, the reconciling of lyricism with dramatic action. From the very beginnings

of opera it was obvious what would be the stumbling block, this fusion or at least cohabitation of the dramatic and lyrical elements which make an opera. Every reform ever proposed or implemented can be traced to this ~~vase~~ cause of concern. Some composers accept the current conventions like Donizetti, some publicly denounce and reform them like Gluck, some surmount them like Mozart, and others try, like Wagner, to destroy them and build a new mixture. In each case we are left with conventions, and one man's solution to the eternal problem, be it his own or his generation's.

Every opera composer starts by filling a more or less conventional mould, depending upon the artistic conditions prevailing at the time. This is the pattern alike for great and small. Peri, Caesine and Monteverde*i* found their solution, Gluck his, Mozart his, and Wagner and Verdi theirs. No one would be fool enough to claim that the reform operas of Gluck have no links with the past, or indeed that the last of these is as much avant-garde as the first. Always after experiment comes consolidation and then the synthesised new style which we tend to nominate as typical. Only The Ring and Tristan are Wagnerian in the accepted sense of the word, a strange paradox. But we tend to think of the Verdi of Rigoletto, Traviata and Trovatore, as THE Verdi. Indeed we have been forced to think along such lines by English musical historians with an insufficient knowledge of their subject, so bemused by such a great German that they proved themselves incapable of following logical lines of evolution in an Italian peasant.

Verdi was always content to use what had been tried and tested and found good, and it is for that reason that some of the older features of opera were carried into his new synthesis of ingredients. The old "props" of opera were not the new style; they were part of it, a small part, but never wholly conventional and always viewed from a new angle. What was new, relatively speaking, was Verdi's answer to our fundamental problem, this fusion of dramatic and lyrical elements in opera.

Act III of Otello is the testing time for this solution, for there are but few of the older props of opera to support the structure. The basic solution depends on the first three quarters of this act, and that is why it is so difficult to digest. To construct an introduction to this act, Verdi makes use of the phrase to which he had set Iago's "Beware my lord of jealousy" in Act II. I have already pointed out that this never became a "jealousy motive" in the accepted sense of the word. Its treatment is more noteworthy than its second appearance. Admirably suited to orchestral melody, Verdi uses it in that curious and individual mixture of polyphony and homophony characteristic of his mature style. First it creeps along in the cello line, later among the other strings, and finally it strides forth in the full orchestra, leaving only first violins, flutes and piccolo playing a scalic figure high above them. As the curtain opens, a beautiful orchestral figure is extracted from the melody. To a sustained brass chord, a herald proclaims to Otello and Iago that the ship bringing ambassadors to Cyprus has been sighted. Again the cadential figure, now with a shake, and Otello bids Iago continue. Iago expounds his final trap for Cassio.

He will bring Cassio to the Great Hall, and while he is questioning him, Otello must observe his every word and action. The melody is perfectly wedded to text and character. Even on his exit line, Iago cannot resist a final jibe, "Il fazzoletto", beautifully placed for a baritone. Otello dismisses him curtly.

Now in E Major, the strings play a short ritornello-like theme as Desdemona enters and she greets her husband in a melody which is the very model of innocence. [Ex.43]

Not without purpose, Otello takes up the same melody, shared with a clarinet: it sounds and is insincere of him. Rather inexpertly he tries to broach the subject of her infidelity, and then taking a portion of the long melody in the orchestra, he tries another tack. Desdemona puts him off easily and this time the flutes add another touch of innocence to the ritornello, as, rather witlessly, she brings up the subject of Cassio.

Otello is immediately seized again by his false malady and asks Desdemona to bind his brow with her soothing kerchief. When she says she has not got it, Otello enjoins "Beware" and the accompaniment - oboe, low clarinets and bassoons - shows who is speaking in Otello. In a short lyrical section in ~~C#~~ minor, Otello tells the origin of the handkerchief, a melody constructed from just the common minor triad, over a magical accompaniment. Otello prepares to make an issue over the handkerchief, his choler rises, to be interrupted by Desdemona's "Tu di me ti fai gioco", the ingenuousness of which only serves to fan the flames within Otello. Cassio's name mentioned again! [Ex.44]

Determined not to be thwarted again, he screams for the handkerchief and Desdemona becomes afraid. Ominous trombone chords and disturbed staccato strings form the background to Otello's "Raise thine eyes" as he endeavours to extract a confession from her own lips. Instead she affirms her innocence and Otello and the full orchestra go wild "<sup>Giuda e</sup> ~~Guido e~~ <sup>ti donna</sup> ~~ti donna.~~"

Desdemona is bewildered and the brass, with the same figures as opens the overture to "<sup>(Vesperi Siciliani?)</sup> I vesari Licillini", depict her confusion. The leap of a ninth on "Furia" is all the more effective after the <sup>monotoned</sup> ~~maintained~~ first sentence. The innocent melody returns at "Mi guarda", and an expressive cantabile melody, directly descended from the earlier heroines supersedes the fear and dread of suspicion. It is the first long melody and the first chordal accompaniment we have heard; the repeated chords of the accompaniment admirably illustrate the sobbing of Desdemona. [Ex.45]

As might well be expected the reiteration of her innocence only further exasperates Otello who casts the timorous Desdemona away from him in a moment of near-madness. With a return to her sobbing melody she asks if she can be the innocent cause of so much grieving for Otello. "What is my fault". Otello's flimsily veiled hints now become horrible accusations: below a tremolo chord on second violins and violas three trombones in unison rise inexorably, urged on by an agitated cello figure which has been used in various forms in this section. The orchestra explodes as Otello hurls his abuse at his wife on the word "Cartegiana". After an equally vigorous denial of this, a sudden peace,

and tranquillity returns to the scene as the ritornello theme returns, more fully scored this time. But the peace is unreal and the tranquillity is only that which foreshadows a storm. This is the very refinement of musical irony for Otello to take the simpering melody of Desdemona's entry and use it as the vehicle of his vilest utterances. Its Shakespearian equivalent "I cry you mercy then,

I took you for that cunning whore of Venice which  
married with Otello,"

possesses most of the ironic quality, but the Verdi version has more because of its direct allusion to what has gone before, one feature which spoken drama can never really recapture in this intensity, and another master stroke from the composer. Before Desdemona can reply, he forces her from the stage, and he returns, torn by conflicting emotions to writhe in a paroxysm of anger, well illustrated in the orchestra playing its first "interlude" while the curtains are open. This is constructed again from the semi quaver motive which conditions this section. [47]

The mood changes easily from rage to grief as the music sinks from E major/minor to Ab minor and the Verdi admirer immediately senses tragedy from the key. The finest individual section of the opera follows, Otello's soliloquy in the original. After such ceaseless battering in the second act, and the inevitable shaking of the preceding pages, the foundations of his happiness slowly crack and the process of ultimate disintegration has begun. The first half of this soliloquy is divided into three short verses, separated by a descending chromatic Dominant-Tonic string phrase in a double-dotted rhythm. Otello sings

only Tonic and Dominant throughout, so the main interest can hardly be termed melodic; in place of vocal "melody" we have perfect declamation, spasmodic and convulsive as befits the text, crushing in its melancholy and tragic in its pathos. A reiterated triplet, organically related to the other figures, in the first violins binds the sections together, helped by the ritornello-like chromatics. [Ex.48] The accompaniment exhibits subtle alterations of shading for each verse. A low B flat becomes a pedal which turns out to be a dominant and the mood changes. The accompaniment seems to stand still as Otello recalls his past happiness in pure and unrestrained melody, founded on a common chord. The little cadence figure where the melody reposes momentarily is important, because it forms another of these little ostinato figures which beget musical development. [Ex.49]

The next portion can be considered either as the final section of Otello's soliloquy [which it is] or as a transition to Iago's entrance. Otello's voice rises slowly and dramatically, again seeking vengeance in another ugly moment, till, at his desperate cry for proof, Iago enters with "Cassio e la". Otello's shout of joy can be taken as the end of the section. In such a position, a shout of joy may seem misplaced. Verdi does it in the grand manner to emphasise the emotion. Otello sees here his chance to put everything right; the joy is at the prospect of securing relief from his torment, and not for exacting vengeance on Desdemona.

The whole soliloquy may be taken as typical of the late Verdi style and represents the composer's solution to the basic problem of



opera. Here we see a synthesis of dramatic and lyrical elements without the strong line of demarcation which characterised the older Italian opera. The text dictates the form of the drama while melody still remains the dominant feature. The drama is played out in the voices, never in the orchestra, although the orchestra of Otello is infinitely more important than the orchestra of Nabucco. Key-note of the whole system is simplicity and economy for both, of which I have given many examples. Let us consider this one number in this light. The descending figure, the triplet motive, the tonic and dominant recitative of Otello, all argue absolute simplicity. In the orchestra the colour is perfect, and not a superfluous note is allowed to spoil or exaggerate the picture being created. But the real agonies of Otello are always in the vocal part: even the tonic dominant section teems with pathos as Otello fights his desperation. Any composer who can wring such emotion from tonic and dominant notes must have found the secret of operatic composition, his own solution. Melody is no longer a four-square tune which conforms to a set pattern or a method of presentation, and which demands for proper treatment a pause in the action. Here the drama dictates the form behind the music; thus Iago enters with his news before Otello has finished his soliloquy. No consideration is allowed to interfere with the dramatic action in the slightest degree, and such a procedure is only possible through the medium of a highly developed, free vocal recitative which becomes the vehicle of dramatic action. This, at any rate, was the Italian solution.

In this scheme of things there was no room for repetition of words, excessive vocalisation of words, non-dramatic vocal embellishments, the formal aria, or the set number because all were unnecessary and all dated from an age where drama was the excuse for opera, not its motivating force. However, more of this later. I only picked in this section because it is the first portion of the opera which can be said to be wholly free from conventions, and the complete embodiment of the "new style".

Otello is taken aback by his own jubilation and becomes not a little apprehensive of what he may hear. Concealing himself behind a pillar, he prepares to hear his doom. Iago brings on Cassio to an ingratiating melody on the first violins, one which again underlines the false bonhomie of Iago. The next melody is yet another which captures the spirit of forced jocularity, a quick change of key and a quick change of subject, while Iago goads Cassio into telling of his amours with Bianca whom Otello, in ignorance of all the asides, assumes to be Desdemona. [ Ex.50 ]

Here the trio proper begins: again the germ is the major triad, this time of Ab. Verdi does not waste effort by evolving characterisations for Cassio, Iago and Otello. To all intents and purposes Cassio and Iago are treated collectively, the only distinguishing features being the ubiquitous shake and the characteristic instrumentalism of Iago. Apart from any other considerations, the situation is psychologically true, since Iago adapts his mood to Cassio's in his efforts to lead him on. The major triad yields a rhythmic motive which

pervades the accompaniment, [Ex.51] and also provides the vocal melody which is distributed between the two voices in the manner of a conversation. The whole affair jogs along at a merry pace, with frequent chortles of laughter from Cassio and Iago. At the end of the first section the dominant has been reached and Otello, changing the tonality to minor, squirms at what he wrongly assumes to be the mockery of Cassio, and the accompaniment adapts itself to his mood. Again the orchestral motive returns and this time Cassio leads, having succumbed to the inquisition of Iago. Otello once more comments on the situation.

There is a quick modulation to Cb as Cassio tells Iago of the handkerchief he has found in his lodgings; Iago leads him further from Otello lest he hear the true story. Otello cannot make out the words, but once the initial facts of its discovery have been disclosed, which Cassio elaborates in the story, Iago beckons Otello. When Cassio boastfully produces the "embroidered napkin" Otello is already on his way. Iago examines it and passes it behind his back for Otello to scrutinize. All this is enacted vocally with a continuous orchestral background where delicious woodwind passages abound in a monument of technical skill.

When Otello sees the handkerchief, he has all his proof, and to a solitary timpano roll he accepts his fate.

Iago is seized by uncontrolled glee which finds an outlet in a fine buffo melody in  $6/8$ , just as in the old cabaletta-operas. [Ex.52] The glee is fiendish but it is still glee. Cassio takes over with a fine lyrical line. When Iago returns it is with his characteristic

accompaniment, and the coda has begun. This time Otello joins the other two and the final cadence is protracted by a beautiful woodwind descending figure, getting quieter and quieter till a solitary trumpet in the distance, followed by a salvo of cannon, announce the arrival of the Venetian ambassadors. This last section is a fine example of the 'new style'. It is instructive to note that the first three-quarters of the trio consists solely of action under the new formula and only the last section can be called in the slightest conventional.

The trumpet-call is only the first of many which inaugurate the opening of the massive ensemble which ends the act. This treatment of the brass comes from the Berlioz Mass, through Verdi's Manzoni Requiem to Otello, but while its appearance and treatment mark no special step forward, I cannot recollect any other occasion in opera where fanfares of trumpets have been used as a background to the preparation of murder. Otello wishes to poison Desdemona but Iago persuades him that it would be more fitting to kill her in the bed which she has defiled and the justice of this pleases the Moor. Shouts of "Long live the Lion of St. Mark" usher on the arrival of the ambassadors. [At this point the ballet appears in the French version of the opera.] Prolonged cries of "Eviya", and stage trumpets augmented by orchestral brass, announce Lodovico's arrival. Every phrase is punctuated with more fanfares. Otello who has recovered some of his lost composure, greets him graciously. While he reads the message Lodovico has brought, the ambassador greets Desdemona, and then Iago. When Otello reacts to the letter, Lodovico questions Iago about his master's condition. Iago

refuses to comment. The ambassador further questions Desdemona and Iago concerning Cassio's absence, and Iago explains his fall from favour, while Desdemona in a superb vocal phrase expresses her wish for his reinstatement. [Ex.53]

Otello tells her to be quiet, but thinking that he was only reading aloud, she is persuaded by Iago to say it again. Otello venomously orders her silence, and as she begs forgiveness he strikes out at her but is impeded by Lodovico. The ambassador's entourage is amazed. Cassio is summoned, and on his arrival Otello reads out the message which recalls him to Venice and appoints Cassio in his place. The cruel asides to Desdemona while he is reading the letter show the quality of Verdi's recitative.

Cassio betrays not the slightest emotion at the news which furthers Otello's anger. He, having made his plans, casts Desdemona to the ground, "A terra - e piangi", without accompaniment.

The construction of the magnificent finale to Act III forms one of the best examples of the coherence and unity of Verdi's inspiration over a long musical section. The music of this finale exhibits Verdi at his best, dealing with large resources, choral and orchestral, and weaving a vast, complex web of sound from the very simplest of germinal themes much as did Beethoven. These germinal themes have no inner significance such as the leit-motives have in Wagner; here they are nothing more than the raw materials out of which Verdi fashions with wonderful skill a whole complex movement. He chose these short motives not because they were significant material melodically, but because they were full of musical potential: *ex nihilo nihil fit*.

It is always a subject for hot debate to question just how far any great composer realises all the implications of the music he writes, how much of the final result is the achievement of skill and how much the result of genuine inspiration. Doubtless Mozart may never have viewed the Clarinet Quintet with the same searchingly analytical eye used by Alan Walker [Study in Musical Analysis], but this author himself points out that the eye merely confirms what the ear hears, and that no amount of note-juggling or clever permutation can impose a unity on a work which the ear does not first recognise. Tchaikovsky would have been amazed at the organisation of material as shown by application of this new technique of analysis to the Fourth Symphony. Vaughan Williams may well have been impressed by the application of Deryck Cooke's analysis of the Sixth Symphony [Language of Music]. In other and different ways Schenker and Schoenberg travelled a great distance and revealed basic truths in their methods of analysis. These are all healthy signs when men of learning and vision attempt to look into the dark recesses of the creative faculty. Several features emerge quite definitely from all these divergent views. They all appear to agree that unity in a musical work is the highest achievement of genius and that this unity is imposed at the sub-conscious level and not the result of applied intellectual effort during the course of composition, and what is more that there is no necessity for the composer of masterpieces to understand completely why he chooses one particular turn of phrase in preference to any other.

*Implication is  
that skill  
precedes  
inspirational*

So far as I am aware no one has attempted to apply any of the newly formulated techniques of modern analysis to opera. Certainly no critic seems to have bothered his head over unity in Verdi's operas.

[Stanford called Falstaff Beethovenian but nowhere did he explain the epithet.] Few of the commentators even mention the subject of unity applied to Italian opera, either as a remotely desirable quality or as a quality which exists in opera. The reason for this failing, if it is a failing, is that there are several other features in opera which go a long way towards providing a feeling of unity without ever touching on such basic yet arcane qualities as inspiration. *A dirty word these days!*

Most of these features which exhibit surface-unity, I have already mentioned, and they are intimately concerned with musical characterisation. The chromatics, turns, orchestral leaps, of the music concerned with Iago, the "brass colour" of Otello's music, the innocence of Desdemona's melodies, and the dark, spiteful orchestral colouring which we always associate with Iago. Indeed the consistency with which Verdi organises and displays these characteristics helps greatly in achieving unity in the whole opera. By extracting the musical qualities of the three main characters we can secure a bird's-eye-view of the real drama [the nobility of Otello, the chastity of Desdemona and the malignity of Iago] at any stage in its development. For example, in the Credo we see the excessive malignity of Iago portrayed in music; in his conversations with Cassio we see the same malignity but cloaked under a false comradeship; when we meet Otello giving vent to uncontrolled anger, the very instruments which support his most noble utterances, the

Instrumentation (in late Verdi anyway) is as much part  
of the composition process as the manipulation of notes. 105.

sustained and majestic brass, go wild in harsh, syncopated, disjointed flurries.

All these features of musical characterisation which perform an involved task in that they give substance to the musical drama and provide a foreground musical unity to opera, are the products of craftsmanship rather than of genius. It is still the organisation of the raw materials, simple musical notes, which springs from genuine inspiration and no critic has ventured so far into Verdi's operas as to investigate this inspiration. Perhaps the image of Verdi the great craftsman has discouraged adventurous spirits; perhaps such analysis is only fitted to instrumental music, and so has no place in opera; perhaps only symphonic composers are capable of such inspiration, and Germans more so than others; perhaps no one has bothered his head over the most popular composer of Italian opera. Certainly it can do no harm to delve into the mysteries of composition concerning Verdi. We cannot prove a unity which does not exist to the ear, and Verdi himself would only have laughed loudly since he probably never gave the subject a thought.

I shall take as my example the finale to Act III, not because it is the easiest, for it is not, but because it is the longest, most complex, and more important, the most conventional movement in the whole opera. Whatever applies to the musical organisation here applies equally well to the rest of Otello and the whole of Falstaff, but I have restricted myself to this one big example which I have attempted to view coldly and analytically. To do the same for two complete operas would have produced nothing more vital than a catalogue.



The finale proper is generally said to begin with two new themes in the orchestra after Otello has struck Desdemona and forced her to the ground. [Key signature of A flat, page 415 of the full score]. A closer investigation proves that the two motives are in fact one, and that one is not at all new, having been sung by Lodovico on page 406. No matter; we shall begin at the same place.

In the first form, the phrase falls a fourth in the lower strings but in a halting manner which emphasises the drop of a third on to the dominant from G. [Example No. 54] The second form rises but it is an arrangement of the same notes, [Example No. 55] in the original rising form: [Example No. 56 using the first four notes.] played on oboes and clarinets, and used by Mozart in the Jupiter Symphony. The next example [No. 57] shows a melody born of the drooping third, two of them, and expanded [Ex. 58] in Verdi's usual fashion by adding extra notes in both directions while preserving the same basic characteristics. This in turn gives way to arioso built on the same feature. [Ex.59], and an orchestral motive constructed in the same manner. [Ex.60]

The quartet which follows exhibits melodic features bearing obvious resemblances to the original motive. [Ex.61], and when Desdemona joins the other characters she does so with Example No. 62. The orchestral motive at letter M in the score is another variation [Ex.63], full of a generative power, which is ably exploited in the following pages. At letter O in the score it appears once in the bar, [Ex.64], then later twice, and finally on every beat as the dot disappears. Then it returns in its first form in brass and voices [Ex.65]

and while Desdemona soars above the strings to her first broad melody, they fashion yet another variation [Ex.66]. At letter P, the original motive shows another face, falling in the high instruments and voices, and rising in the lower, [Ex. 67; Ex.68], attaining a superb climax in a unison line for full orchestra and voices which reaches the dominant note E flat before Otello clears the stage.

The new figure at letter S is easily related to our original motive, [Ex.69], and so is that which brings the act to a close. [Ex.70]. The key scheme of the whole finale is interesting as an example of Verdi's organisation of keys in a large structure. Fanfares which initiate the finale begin in C major; passing through F major and A major, by way of E major to a pedal B which eventually, by means of an interrupted cadence at letter G, gives way to another pedal on G which leads to C minor [letter H]. At letter I instead of the expected chord of Db, we find an enharmonic change into C sharp minor, thence to the minor of the relative major just after letter J, E minor, and from there chromatically to the dominant seventh chord on Eb which heralds the finale proper. Thus the tonality of the dramatic sections is highly fluid, but bound by strong principles, namely Tonic to Tonic minor, Neapolitan [which is in fact prepared but avoided] and on to the submediant major, A flat where the real finale begins.

The real finale is much more conventional, that is, without so many brief excursions from the main keys. A flat to E flat major; thence to F major and back to A flat and E flat major and minor. The minor key leads to B flat and back to F major. C minor leads to A flat and E flat

before returning to C minor. The implied return to A flat foreshadowed by the dominant chord at Q, does not materialise because Otello interrupts the proceedings, and the rapid modulation is resumed, through sharp keys before a temporary home is found in E minor. The fanfares resume in C major and after strong major/minor dispute, the act ends on the major chord.

This type of analysis, as illustrated above, is a method I have used to show that Verdi's last operas have at their centre a fundamental unity above and beyond anything supplied by the drama and the characterisation. This method can be rewardingly applied to any section of either of the two operas, but it is a method I have only indicated elsewhere because it takes no note of the drama and concerns itself not at all with the expressive power of the music. I have taken particular pains to avoid the opposite extreme with its tendency towards complete subjectivity of interpretation of the music and scorning of analysis. The result is a foot in both camps, and I hope that I have avoided cold, clinical analysis, while showing that it is both possible and profitable, and have shunned over-indulgence in personal emotionalism while betraying enthusiasm for both of these works. Remembering Pope's famous lines:

"A perfect judge reads each work of wit

With the same spirit that its author writ",

I cannot but think that Verdi would have approved the venture.

The last act of the opera was greeted with "universal admiration" to use Hanslick's phrase, even at the first performances. It is not difficult to perceive the reason for the immediate praise for the act is

much shorter than the other three, the dramatic action is rapid and concise, not hindered by any conventional trappings. These are, nevertheless, but the superficial reasons which make such a quick judgment possible, and we should be wary lest we place too much faith in the contemporary critics for when *Otello* was a new experience, new because they heard nothing of the opera before its first performance since Verdi rigidly enforced the Scala rule of excluding everyone from rehearsals. Riccerdi only offered the vocal score for sale on the morning of the first night in his big shop in Milan, so the musings of even the most perspicacious critic could only be first impressions.

Thus, adhering to the theory "any port in a storm", they clutched at what was immediately intelligible, the set-pieces in the opera, the quality of the recitative, the superb instrumentalism, and any tune which appeared a second time was a motive. True to form, Hanslick bought a score, studied it and attended one of the later performances, considering a "first night" not conducive to reasoned appreciation.

Act IV opens in Desdemona's bedchamber with an instrumental prelude, quite lengthy this time, to paint the situation. The first three discernible figures, provide the material for the act.

- (1) A plaintive cor anglais melody. [Ex.71]
- (2) A cadential flute figure. [Ex.72]
- (3) Three low clarinet chords, tonic and dominant. [Ex.73]

Hussey states that this is the first occasion on which the cor anglais appears in *Otello*, but this is quite untrue. The instrument is used in the love-duet of the first act, although without the prominence

here assigned to it. He further likens the second figure to "the sigh of a breaking heart" and the third to "a ghastly death knell", both of which similes are thoroughly worthy of the music.

The whole introduction is devoted to woodwind instruments and one horn, an unusual procedure for Verdi who, while he recognised the capabilities of the individual instruments and their collective aptitudes, rarely gave them full rein in an episode like this. The introduction is based on the figures mentioned above, in ~~C#~~ minor, and is worthy of standing beside the introduction to the "Nile Scene" in Aida, as a superlative creation of atmosphere by orchestral means.

*calms*  
The lower strings close the prelude and introduce the voices, Emilia and Desdemona. Emilia enquires of Desdemona news of Otello "Era piu echimo": he has told her to go to bed and wait for him. All this is founded on the minor triad of ~~C#~~. The dread clarinet chords appear and Desdemona asks Emilia to lay out her nuptial garments: the ~~C#~~ of the final chord turns out to be an Ab, as Desdemona, fearful of her fate, asks Emilia to bury her in one of the veils if she is first to die. Again the clarinet chords and Desdemona recalls her mother's maid Barbara, deserted by her lover, and the way she used to sing: it haunts her this evening and she cannot rid herself of it.

As in the Credo, the third act duet between Otello and Desdemona, and the ~~trio~~ in the same act, Verdi constructs another short ritornello [Ex.74] this for woodwind to introduce and bind together Desdemona's <sup>a</sup> Solces: it is a sad, pathetic passage. This too, like the Credo, is often lifted from the opera and performed separately in concert-fashion:

even here it can have a profound effect but that effect is in no way comparable to the effect it attains in its context. In its original state it is one of the most deeply moving passages in all Shakespearean tragedy, and therefore it becomes more, not less, difficult to present in a nineteenth century Italian opera. Verdi presents it in verse form and we look forward to some fine moments of lyrical repose. The voice has the cor anglais melody of the opening, this time in ~~F~~ minor and the orchestration is that rare example of genuine economy producing just the right colour. Hussey states that Stanford used to use this as a model for his pupils in orchestration, the whole act. The cor anglais moves only when the voice pauses, and the phrase accompanied by soft string chords on violins and violas, is heralded by the sustained ~~E~~'s of piccolo and cor anglais, three octaves apart. The refrain line <sup>a</sup> Solce, solce, solce, is always unaccompanied: the whole phrase is repeated, with slightly varied accompaniment, but this time the cor anglais echoes Desdemona's final "Solce", and a new phrase brings the verse to a close. While the orchestra plays the ritornello theme, Desdemona tells Emilia to hurry.

This accompaniment changes to suit the second verse: Cor anglais and piccolo F sharp lasts much longer as the violins and violas and a flute shake picture the <sup>flowing brook</sup> "~~flaring brook~~", and later the woodwind the sobbing tears of the girl in the story. This time we only have one refrain line, again the cor anglais echo and the same final phrase closes the second verse.

The third verse lasts much longer because it is split-up by passages of conversation and dramatic action. The same ritornello introduces it, but while the "birds rush down from the trees" in the orchestra, Desdemona's melody has changed. She gives her ring to Emilia while the orchestra appears to mark time with one of the ritornello figures. When she reaches the moral of the story, the full significance of her tale unfolds. "He was born for his glory and I to love ... " As her final note dies away, a noise disturbs her and her fear and trembling show in the orchestra. It soon passes, and she finishes her song.

While the orchestra toys with the ritornello theme, she bids farewell to Emilia: "How my eyelids burn. It presages weeping." Calmly, on a low F sharp, she says "Goodnight" to Emilia, and then, seized with a sudden dread, in one of those moments which only opera can capture, she rises to an ~~A~~ above the stave and falls back to the same ~~F~~ saying "Farewell". [Ex.75] Emilia departs and Desdemona makes her way to the prie-dieu, while the orchestra rounds off the section using the flute motive from the opening. The whole section is thus nicely constructed, beautifully expressive, and superbly executed, exhibiting the complete mastery of Verdi's art. Here indeed is "the triumphant answer of Italian art to the threat of German domination."

After this, Boito added an "Ave Maria" for Desdemona which was full of potential dangers; in the hands of a lesser composer it could have been a veritable operatic suicide. Here, however, there is nothing maudlin or sententious, just a deep and touching act of profound faith, where the pathos of the situation is so acute, so

finely balanced that any artifice, any technical trick would mock the end in view. For that reason everything is restrained, particularly the accompaniment. Only muted strings, without basses, accompany this portion. The musical construction is of the simplest. After a modest introduction, Desdemona sings the first section in a rhythmic monotone of dominant Eb. Only then does a fine melody, based on the string introduction, rise above the monotone. The restrained lyricism is as profound as it is moving, but after it, we return to the original method, only rising again for a final Ave, as she rises and makes her way to wait for Otello.

She does not have to wait very long; the double-basses, absent from the previous section, tell us that Otello is near. [Ex.76] Muted and starting from their lowest note, they steal across the scene pianissimo. However in performances, for reasons only known to the conductor, they usually steal over the scene with the delicacy of a startled rhinoceros. A locus classicus of instrumentation, Hanslick writes of it as "bordering on the bizarre" which suggests that the earliest conductor, Faccio, may have committed the same error as above.

A new semiquaver figure in violas appears followed by a dull thud on the bass drum, [Ex.77], while the basses continue their melody, this three times in all. Boito described the bass drum effect as "like three shovelfuls of earth". The basses take up the new figure, and after a brief rush of terror, the orchestra and Otello halt. He pulls back the curtain and gazes on the sleeping Desdemona: cor anglais and bassoon take up the double bass melody in an effort to recall the



purpose of his visit but the music dissolves into the sequence from the love duet where Otello kissed Desdemona and he does so again. Desdemona wakes.

Violas with cellos take up their motive and as the tension increases, cornets, trumpets and trombones replace the bass drum. From this moment the dramatic action quickens. Otello is calm and acts with dignity, like a man executing his duty not a monster perpetrating some callous crime. The quality of the recitative is magnificent over a background of the semiquaver figure. Desdemona still refuses to confess the crime of which she is not guilty; she asks for Cassio to corroborate her story, but Otello says that Cassio will be forever silent.

He will brook no further delays and he suffocates her. Only then does a little of the old fury spring up in the orchestra as the quiet bass theme of his entrance rampages through the orchestra on double basses, bass trombone and four bassoons. He looks again at Desdemona "Calma come la tomba".

Emilia knocks madly at the door and entering tells Otello the news that Cassio has killed Roderigo, but Cassio still lives. An explosion in the orchestra is followed by the distant, dying comment of Desdemona. Asking Otello's forgiveness, she dies. Otello confesses to the murder of his wife and the climax of the dialogue is unaccompanied, Verdi showing the same remarkable insight that Beethoven showed in Fidelio. *what insight exactly?*

Emilia shouts for help and Cassio, Iago and Lodovico rush in. She calls Iago to account for his part in the scheme. Otello mentions

the handkerchief and Iago orders Emilia to hold her tongue. She does not. Cassio reinforces her story, and Montano entering reports the confession of the dead Roderigo. Iago flees. The full significance of his deed wakes in Otello, and his fate is certain.

In a dignified but subdued recitative, Otello, once more restored to his former nobility, announced his fate. As he lets fall his sword the thud of the bass drum returns. He walks to the bedside of Desdemona and looks again, this time with different eyes. His thoughts come out in the most perfect declamation: virtually unaccompanied, the passage is so turgid with pathos as would melt the coldest heart. [Ex. 78]

Secretly Otello draws a dagger and plunges it into his breast. The music of his last act comes back, when he first gazed on his wife, and in Shakespeare's "I kiss'd thee 'ere I killed thee; no way but this,  
Killing myself to die upon a kiss."

The climax of the love-duet returns and Otello kisses Desdemona three times, and falls beside her dead. This is another of the moments which only opera can bring off, for no amount of verbal allusion could have the same effect as the recurrence of a musical phrase. On a quiet E minor chord the opera ends, indubitably the greatest Italian tragic opera of the nineteenth century.

In the foregoing analysis of Otello I have attempted to underline the most salient features of the opera by breaking the structure into its component parts. Something must now be said about the opera as a whole. It is usual to read of Otello showing a "new Verdi", "a new style" and for that reason I have throughout used the phrases in quotation

marks. This is completely untrue, because all the novelties ever enumerated by critics and commentators can be traced from earlier works of the composer. The only feature that is "new" is the consistency of style which is portrayed in Otello. The heralds of the "new style" which appear in works like *Boccanegra* and *Ballo in Maschera*, *Don Carlos*, and even *Macbeth*, to mention but a few, only make the quality of these works uneven, because of the inconsistency of style. They are great works only for their great moments, not for their overall conception.

The absence of numbers was another contributing factor to Otello being termed new. *Aida* was divided into numbers according to the old method but Otello is not. The numbers are still there at times, but now we do not have to stop at the end of each one for they are skilfully joined together. I agree with Toye and Hussey who think that this lack of set numbers probably arises more from the nature of the drama than from a definite desire on Verdi's part to rid Italian opera of yet another convention. The drama does not allow of set-pieces in the conventional manner.

Otello was the meeting point of past and present: the style of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini could not go on for ever. It must not be forgotten that Verdi managed the cause of Italian opera virtually single-handed for many, many years. Whatever he saw fit to retain from the old school, he retained. The individual numbers, aria, duet, trio, quartet, ensemble, were retained as long as they were dramatically justifiable. But that was ~~only~~ the condition of their continued survival not the excuse to retain them. Verdi accepted them only on his own

terms and gradually they became more dramatic and less lyrical in accordance with the spirit of the times.

The orchestra became more and more important (until in Otello it is an integral part of the opera.) It could only be an integral part when its treatment was consistent, and the level of orchestral inspiration could be maintained. With Verdi, its importance grew slowly but very surely. There are no lapses in Otello, and Wagner's epithet of "effects without cause" can certainly not be applied to Otello. No pains are spared to get the right colour all the time, and that accounts for the many special effects in the opera, the organ pedals, the cor anglais, the echoing trumpets, the big drum all achieve their purpose and nothing more. The mixing of the colours is masterly: beyond description: and I have mentioned many such instances in my analysis, but even this must be consistently brilliant. There is superb colouring in the last act of Rigoletto, but it only clashes with the banality of the opening scene: again as late as Aida, the exotic atmosphere of the Nile contrasts oddly with the Grand Finale of the second act and its big drum pounding.

I have described the method of composition as "from motives". This method imparts the essential unity to an opera as complex as Otello. The motives are developed throughout and not often retained in their original state for very long. So the whole finale to Act III is built on only two small motives which I have quoted, and the same practice is carried out throughout the opera. These little motives are aided from time to time by a direct allusion, like Otello dying on a

kiss to his first act music, or the introduction to Act III, based on Iago's speech about "Jealousy" in Act II. They are not the compositional method of Otello. In fact, the jealousy theme as I have pointed out, is constructed from a much smaller motive. There are only two "themes" in Otello, neither of which is used after the Wagner fashion: both are "psychological reminiscence" and nothing else. *That is surely just what Wagner intended!*

The characterisation of the opera as a whole has never been described as less than brilliant, nor could it be. Iago in particular is wonderfully delineated. Never does it slip in any of the main characters, illustrating again the consistency of Verdi's Otello. Toye calls Iago "the apotheosis of melodramatic villainy" which is rather unfair. We see more of Iago than ever we would of the "villain of the piece". We have the real Iago, the false Iago, and the delighted Iago, as well as the mixed shades, and finally the triumphant Iago at the end of Act III, and the frightened Iago of Act IV. This is no melodramatic villain but a musical representation of a character which is truer than the truth. Similarly Otello is drawn in the sound and we can see his fine feelings, his noble nature, and his debased state. Desdemona is a convincing figure musically despite her witlessness which tends to exasperate one. Even Cassio and Emilia have a musical character which is all their own when the occasion demands it.

The variety and quality of the recitative, the true vehicle of dramatic action, which amazed the original critics can still amaze now. Carlo Gatti classifies the types of recitative in Otello, and covers almost every conceivable type which has ever been used. The old barrier

between dramatic recitative and lyrical aria has weakened considerably by the time we reach Otello: no longer is aria aria and recitative recitative. The two have come closer together, more like they were in late Monteverde, than in Rossini. But the two were never merged into an endless chain of arioso: Verdi's penchant for order and vocal supremacy saw to that. Thus we have the little ritornello passages of Otello which co-ordinate the long-spun melody of late Verdi. Nowhere do we see a lack of system, vocal system, which would allow the new length of melody to ramble and get out of hand. Once this is allowed to happen, the only way to restore some kind of form, is to do it through some other medium, namely the orchestra.

H. C. Colles, writing in the "Growth of Music" says of Otello (and Falstaff) "People were amazed to find many lessons from Wagner embodied in these works: the plots were developed in continuous music through the whole scene, the musical style was made flexible to the dramatic situation in the way that Wagner advocated... Verdi's art had always been serious, and always been great, but why in these works did he, through Wagner's example, find a way of couching is which was altogether worthy of its greatness."

Scholes, true to form, says Verdi "learnt from Wagner both in true artistic dramatisation and also in actual method (e.g. plastic, continuous tuneful recitative for the voices, a whole musical fabric of real value, etc."

*Doubtful!* (Both men show a fundamental misconception of Wagner and Verdi.)  
Wagner did not originate the sharper emphasis on the dramatic, he merely

*This does not make the work Wagnerian!*

followed it in accordance with the spirit of the age which tended that way. Was Gluck a Wagnerian? Was <sup>etc</sup> Beethoven, Weber, Meyerbeer or Gunod? I find the attitude, prevalent among many English musical historians, that all things bright and beautiful in nineteenth century opera were sent from Wagner is not only intolerable but indefensible. Verdi was an operatic mastodon while Wagner was still trying to get his works performed. The seeds of the "new style" go back at least as far as Rigoletto, and Wagner, at the time, had not even completed the poem of "The Ring".

Verdi's heroes were men not ideals. One would hardly call the Ring a tight human drama. Otello and Falstaff, in the true Italian tradition, are singers' operas. There are no leading motives in either. The voices enact the drama while the orchestra always accompanies. There are no metaphysical problems, no symbolism, no myths, no problems of "world-outlook", and no endless melos. How then can they be termed Wagnerian?

On his own admission, Verdi was not a student of scores. Apart from that consideration he thought it was only possible to judge a work by its appearance in a theatre and not from paper, and the only Wagnerian works he saw were Lohengrin, Tannhauser and possibly the Flying Dutchman. Boito, Giulio Ricordi and the eminent contemporary critic Filippi, testified to Hanslick that Verdi knew none of the later Wagnerian music dramas. He had a great admiration for Wagner which is explained elsewhere, and he fully appreciated that man's genius. His agent in Paris, Escudier, procured Wagner's theatrical works in French translation for

Neither Guller  
nor Scholas  
went so  
far as to  
say this,  
though you  
imply that  
they do!

Verdi to read. Wagner was right for Germany, but not for Italy.

To hear his later works termed Wagnerian was a bitter blow for Verdi. One can almost feel the physical pain when he mentions the subject in his letters. That, more than anything else accounts for the long delay after Aida, and it is quite significant that no new work was produced till after Wagner's death. Verdi said that the Wagnerian music drama had no place in the musical tradition of Italy: he told Italians that, if they wanted to go forward, they must look back to their inheritance: he, personally, knew none of the so-called Wagnerian works of Wagner. For anyone who has troubled to find out a little of the character of Verdi, and who has never heard a note of his music, that is sufficient evidence to refute any charges of Wagnerism. But, alas, the shades of Bayreuth descend again. Since Wagner was an acknowledged perverter of the truth, and most of his related "facts" are either complete fabrications, or half-truths, how can we believe Verdi? This type of stupid reasoning dominates the whole Wagner-Verdi question which can never be satisfactorily resolved until the individual lines of development have been traced in both composers.

Point of view sound but not clearly stated. The difficulty of course is that Wagner's ideals have been received by critics exclusively for Wagner. Ottlils can boast a "musical style made flexible to the dramatic situation", "a whole musical fabric of real value" WITHOUT being Wagnerian. Colles does not necessarily imply that Verdi learned from W.



CHAPTER FOUR

FALSTAFF, "THE LYRIC COMEDY"

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The commentators on Verdi's works all stress the difficulty of analysing Falstaff which is due, they say, to the excellence of the opera as a whole and the fragmentary nature of the opera. To pick on all the points of interest would run to excessive length and would also result in overshadowing the final effect by placing too much emphasis on the fragments. Musicians seem to be generally in agreement with Richard Strauss who described the work as "one of the greatest masterpieces of all time", but I think rather a lot of lip-service has been paid to this opera, while very few people appreciate its true worth. It is, in every sense of the phrase, a musician's opera and it exhibits a complete mastery of every device and artifice connected with the word opera, the final synthesis based on a life-time's experience of writing opera.

From Oberto to Falstaff there is a span of fifty-six years, a lifetime of creative activity devoted exclusively to opera, [including the Manzoni Requiem]. We are inclined to forget sometimes that the greater majority of composers were not blessed with the same longevity as Verdi which alone accounts for the vast differences in style from Oberto to Falstaff. Verdi's creative life was indeed longer than most composers were privileged to live, let alone compose.

In Verdi's youth it was the accepted fashion for composers to write more than one type of opera, and it had long been the case. Mozart had filled every form, and later in Italy, Rossini, Donizetti,

and Bellini wrote grand, tragic, and comic opera with equal facility. Verdi, after the fiasco of his one early attempt at comedy, sensed in which direction his genius lay, even though he had sworn to give up composition of any kind during his years of despair. His return to the theatre was marked by Nabucco - an immediate triumph - for which he received the same price as Bellini had received for "Norma". From then on, it was a tale of success breeding success. There were setbacks, but focussing his attention on the tragic, human drama, he went from an initial success which was Nabucco in 1843 to a world wide reputation in the short period of eight years with Rigoletto in 1851. From that moment, he was Prince of the Italian opera houses, and most of the opera houses in Europe: his success in Italy was never even challenged, because there was no one capable of challenging him on his home ground.

All the operas were tragic, but at the back of his mind, there was always the desire to write a comic opera as soon as the subject presented itself; Don Quixote had been suggested many times before and tentative sketches for Moliere's Tartuffe exist. He must have thought twice of many of the suggested subjects. Why write a comic opera at all? It seems natural to suppose that the idea was always there but it is difficult to give express reasons for its sudden reappearance after Otello. It seems likely that he would want to avenge his early failure in the medium, although he would be the first to admit that Un Giorno di Regno was of the poorest. Rossini had said that Verdi had no talent for comic opera. Donizetti always mentioned that Verdi was not inclined to the comic. Hanslick even as late as Otello said there was not a trace of

humour in him. Finally his faithful collaborator gave him the incomparably best libretto in the Italian language.

However, it does seem a little odd that most of his contemporaries, particularly one as careful and attentive to detail as Hanslick, should have missed most of the earlier stages of Falstaff's development. I refer of course to the more obvious roles of Oscar the page in *Ballo in Maschera*, and Fre Melitone, the worldly monastic of *Forza del Destino*, both of whom are well-drawn characters in these works, and display more than light relief.

Yet (the important thing is that) Verdi did write Falstaff and he greatly enjoyed doing it. One biographer says he spent no more than two hours per day working on it because he believed excessive work would undermine his health, and he was an inveterate hypochondriac.

While agreeing with the critics and commentators that the opera is difficult to analyse properly without excessive length, there is still a great deal which must be said about Falstaff. The method of composition is the same as it was in *Otello*, although here it is still more refined, more aristocratic. The corners are rounded off and the whole structure sanded and polished to a perfection rarely encountered in an opera by any composer. It is indeed a great tribute to any opera to say that it exhibits a refinement of *Otello*, but the two works can only be compared from the angle of compositional method, and the vocal and orchestral techniques displayed in each.

As in *Otello*, there is no formal overture, not even a prelude. Hardly has the orchestra begun to play the first boisterous motives of

Falstaff when the curtains open revealing the fat knight sealing his letters, and Caius storms into the room in the Garter Inn, shouting for the brigands who have turned his home into disorder. [Ex.79]. Falstaff ignores him at first till Caius says his house has been raided. "But not your housekeeper," says Falstaff, and here Caius thanks him with mock solemnity. Finally Falstaff prepares to reply to the insistent demands of Dr. Caius, and as he does so, another motive, constructed beautifully from the old one spreads through the strings, [Ex.80] to the voice and the woodwind juggle with the semiquaver figure of the first one. [Ex.81]

The original comes back in A major, the submediant, when Falstaff has explained his actions and he directs Caius "To hell". As Caius shouts for Bardolpho, a note of unctuousness appears in Bardolpho's reply "Sir Dottore", and as he offers his pulse for the doctor's professional opinion, while the accompaniment fashions another variation on the second Falstaff motive, this time jerky to illustrate Bardolpho's malady as the semiquaver figure becomes a triplet. Through A major we go to E minor, back to A major and then to F major where Caius accuses the henchmen of stealing his purse.

Falstaff's mock serious mood and motive return as he questions Pistola about his part in the proceedings. The original figure returns, with the serious one in diminution and the effervescent woodwind triplet above it. Pistola asks Falstaff whether he can lay about Caius with the broom and the high-spirited opening figure returns in C major, with only the first part of it repeated again and again. [Ex.82]

The solemnity returns in C major when Falstaff questions Bardolpho. Then the motive appears in augmentation in E major, with tipsy scales up in the piccolo, down in the violins as Bardolpho tells of Caius' passion for drink. Now that Falstaff has heard all the "evidence" he can pass a reasoned judgment. In a beautiful melody he passes sentence on Caius: first without accompaniment. As Caius flings his last insults at them, the trombones play semiquaver chords at the natural pauses, just like a fist shaking first solo and then with trumpets added. When Caius reaches the finale of his address the first motive is back in the orchestra. Bardolpho and Pistola complete the atmosphere by adding a long contrapuntal "Amen".

Falstaff quietens them, and then upbraids them for their lack of artistry in thieving in a superb phrase, but they only sing their "Amen" again and Falstaff has to shout for silence, so he can reckon his bill. Religiously he counts it, backed by a few sustained horns. He cannot meet his score, and blames his minions for his present financial distress. [Ex.83].

The quaver rhythm from the first motive [Ex.83] forms the basis of another little tune as Falstaff describes Bardolpho's nose lighting up their journeys from one inn to the next, saving money they would have to spend on lanterns. But still they are cramping his style. A delightful new melody [Ex.84A] appears as he describes his paunch as his fortune with a unison accompaniment of piccolo and cello, three octaves apart. For his paunch a broad expanding figure is used. [Ex.84] Bardolpho, Pistola and the full orchestra join in sanctimoniously to

worship the paunch of their "mighty lord", in a fortissimo cadence in Db.

Treating the Ab of the final chord as a G sharp, we are quickly into A major as Falstaff starts to outline his plan, to another new theme, devised again from the first one. [Ex.85]. Bardolpho and Pistola join in dutifully at the right moments to impress Falstaff, but it might be serious, till he speaks of love kindling in his heart and the broad figure of his paunch comes back in E minor, and we realise it's only cupboard love after all. The figure stays while he praises his comely form. The original figure comes back as the thought of Alice returns and the glance which seemed to say "I love you, Sir John Falstaff", a beautiful phrase sung falsetto. More agitated still comes the original figure, this time in D major, as he mentions his other potential conquest. There is another expressive phrase when he mentions he is still a fine figure of a man.

As he prepared to entrust his billets-doux to the two rogues, a strong C major figure, again from the first one, punctuates his orders. The two potential messengers summon up all their phoney dignity when they decline his kind offer. To a new figure [Ex.86], full of hustle and bustle, he calls the page and gives them instead to him. Then he turns on Bardolpho and Pistola.

"Honour! Rogues!" This is Boito's version of the monologue on Honour from the Falstaff of the histories. A superbly constructed piece this, with masterly declamation. Every word is captured, every little point underlined. The music is a mixture of old and new motives,

and when Falstaff gets himself worked up to a frenzy, Iago's shakes appear as they did in Otello on oboe, bassoon and clarinet. The most effective portion as might be expected is unaccompanied. "Can Honour fill your belly or mend a broken link?" Each negative is underlined by clarinet, bassoon and pizzicato bass. "What is it then? A word" and this has a little leap on the flute to emphasise the insignificance of "a word", and then a wonderful airy shake for the flutes, just like a breath of wind as he says "It's invisible ether". "Does it stay with the dead? No. With the living? No. Human vanity corrupts it." Here we have some more ~~swished~~ <sup>scrister</sup> stirrings in the orchestra particularly from the trombones. Then something like the original figure returns with "I'll have none of it". [Ex.87]. Having given away his views on that subject, he sets about dismissing Bardolpho and Pistola, and he grabs the broom to aid his mission. Accompanied by a violent crescendo on the full orchestra, he throws them out, shouting abuse as he does so. The high woodwind and trumpets repeat the "honour" motive [Ex.88] and the first scene gallops to a close in Falstaff's own key of C Major.

Woodwind and horns open the second scene in Ford's garden with a brilliant  $\frac{6}{8}$  allegro which is used throughout to illustrate the chatter and bustle of the women in the opera. The piece is short and in E major. The ladies have come together for a morning chatter, for both Meg and Alice have some rather special news, and we can sense their excitement from the orchestral introduction. Throughout the first part of this scene, the vocal parts are short and their melody fragmentary, just as in a quick exchange of words. The first part of the woodwind



introduction is the motive of the music and this flits across the orchestral scene ceaselessly. [Ex.89]. When the voice part has more than a few notes, it is usually a snatch of the original melody, but the whole moves with such speed and apparent abandon that sometimes a melody is over before its effect registers on the listener. When they all ask Alice to tell her story she gets them to promise not to repeat it and the phrase of their promises is particularly happy since it characterises the exaggerated attitude of comedy which prevails throughout the opera; every promise is exacted with the greatest musical solemnity; every secret is particularly secret; thus in the first act we saw the irreverent reverence of Bardolpho for Caius and the thoughtless meditation of Falstaff over Caius' problem. The very idea behind it is funny and the musical phrases are so apt, so finely wrought, that the whole opera is great sport. [Ex.90]. Then there is a catching phrase of climbing fourths when Alice visualises a rise in her station to Lady, and the build-up before Alice produces her letter. [Ex.91]

The Verdi of Otello would have constructed a skilful transition here, but again we have a fine feeling for the comic-effect, only like most of the other glimpses we have of this Verdi, it seems to be a superfine comedy, with more than a touch of melancholy. Here the sad tune of the cor anglais accentuates the comedy but refines it at the same time. [Ex.92]. Meg reads the one to Alice and it rings a bell. It's like hers, and to prove it, Alice reads the opening of Meg's letter. The differentiation between the latter and their conversation is remarkably well-made, their chatter being a very free recitative and their reading

a charming "forced" melody. They compare all the distinguishing features as well, writing, seal and paper; and then, in unison they continue their melodic reading. Nanetta comments "You, he, thee", to Falstaff's "We'll make a fine pair" and Mistress Quickly aptly says "A pair in three".

Alice continues to read, and the phrases are so hackneyed that the others join in a unison at the end of the line. The letter-reading began in D major, now the key is B minor, and then we slip into E major for the end of the letter, and one of Verdi's most beautiful melodies, chromatically harmonised, a moment when he almost seems to forget that this is comedy. [Ex.93] The loud laughs at the end convince us and make the effect of the previous melody even funnier. Alice reads the envoi with great dignity on a monotone, so much so that we can feel that the affair will not rest. "The man's a monster", so say they all with appropriate brass and timpani support.

Here a short transition passage joins their shouts of "Monster" to the quartet. The several ladies voice their opinions of Falstaff, the music slips into  $\frac{6}{8}$ , and after a dominant pedal in B, the quartet begins. The melody as does that of the transition, shows obvious affinities to that of the introduction to the scene. [Ex.94]

Beautifully accompanied by flutes and oboes playing the same notes, it rushes along helter-skelter, all the ladies united in their aim to teach Falstaff a lesson.

Then the men enter, in the same frame of mind, but with a simple tune to contrast with the ladies' compound one. This is accompanied by the more masculine horns and bassoons. [Ex.95]

To this the ladies add their comments in brief fragments. The scalic figures in the men's lower voices are particularly effective, up and down a complete chromatic scale. Even here the text is followed closely in the orchestral passages. The passage where Falstaff is compared to the devil has an echo in the orchestra. Then as Pistola explains the position to Ford, accompanied only by cellos, basses and bassoons, the key signature changes, and a calculated build-up in the grand manner by the full orchestra as Pistola says that Falstaff is after Ford's pillow, the final "dread" words unaccompanied. Bardolpho and Pistola adopt their oily music as they tell of the part they refused to play. "Falstaff ogles all women", they say to a snatch of orchestral melody very like Falstaff's own in the first scene. [ Ex.96 ]

Ford promises to watch his wife carefully. The women appear and together they depart, leaving behind Nannetta and Fenton.

Fenton attracts Nanetta's attention with two notes on piccolo and oboe, and protesting feebly she comes over to him, as two flutes, an oboe and a clarinet play a tiny introduction. This is without doubt the most perfect representation of boy and girl love in music. Any other type would of course have failed musically, because the very object of the comedy is built round Sir John's roguery and his allied cupboard love. Alice and Meg parody this with their "genuine" love-music to match his "serious" attentions. There is no passionate longing in Nanetta and Fenton's love, no eroticism, just a young love's dream faithfully reproduced in music. The actual melody is one long unit although it is shared between the voices: muted strings and occasional soft woodwind preserve the idyll in sensitive chromatic harmony. [ Ex.97 ]

In a flash, all is over and a little warning figure in the orchestra sends them running for shelter in the bushes. A new figure unaccompanied except for a high oboe Ab, is exchanged from their hiding places, and the orchestra closes the charming episode. [Ex.98]

The ladies return to yet another figure; this time they are annoyed as the full orchestra and syncopated brass point out. The figure which supports Alice's injunction to Quickly to see Falstaff at the Garter and arrange an appointment is very reminiscent of his own figure in Act I, Scene I. The figure used to show their annoyance comes back now, in G~~♯~~ minor instead of Ab, as the women plot his downfall, and decide who will do what in the plan. Shaking with glee the section ends in E major. Quickly catches sight of Fenton and the women rush away, leaving the lovers alone.

This time the melody is in the orchestra and the voices have only fragments of it. The accompaniment is magically modified, to an airy gaiety first; then as Fenton warns Nanetta to guard against his kisses, soft trombone chords exactly like those which accompanied Caius in the first scene, remind us that this is just innocent affection. The gentle warfare of their love is well translated into music as triplets in the woodwind and duplets in the strings wage a similar minor war, both parties eager for more combat. Again their repose is spoiled, this time by the return of the men.

The men now fix up their final plan; a kettledrum rolls on the final Ab, which is in fact G~~♯~~, and the men return to their original ensemble in E major.

This is repeated in full and we get the whole effect of compound and simple time together, which although it appears complicated on paper, sounds perfectly clear in performance. The instrumentation of the separate strings adds greatly to the general effect.

As the men go out, the key changes and the tempo quickens. They arrange the big day for the next day. Alice takes out her letter to read it once more. The other voices join her, one by one, as she prophesies that she will capture Falstaff, bolster him up, and then explode him; all of which the orchestra pictures. Another enharmonic change and we are back once more in E major. Alice sings again her wonderful melody for the end of Falstaff's letter and this time the others join in, and all are laughing heartily as the chattering theme from the beginning of the scene takes over and whisks the scene to a close.

The first part of Act II is again set at the Garter Inn where the reclining Falstaff is taking his ale. Another chuckling prelude tells his mood, for all is indeed to his liking. As the prelude finishes Bardolpho and Pistola enter, beating their breasts in abasement and imploring forgiveness for their past sins. Just in case Falstaff did not grasp the full significance of their penitential act, they repeat it for him. The chuckles of the introduction return to the accompaniment as Bardolpho tells him an old lady is seeking an audience, and with arrogant condescension Falstaff says "Admit her." [Ex.99]

As Mistress Quickly approaches humbly, she greets Falstaff to a phrase of paramount importance in the opera: "Reverenza". This is a

musical curtsey, a little gem which catches the spirit of the whole opera, the exaggerated nicety which underlines the outward humility. See how cleverly the opening is constructed, since a lowly woman in the presence of a great knight would never dare to speak first. Her "Reverenza" is essentially a phrase in response to Falstaff's. But the first time, the strings play Falstaff's part and we can see the knight taking stock of the situation, rather like giving an appraising glance before speaking. [Ex.100]

After such a respectful opening, his greeting is magnanimous, and she again curtsies gracefully. She has something to discuss in private so Falstaff gets rid of his two comrades, and she rewards his efforts with another curtsy.

A syncopated rhythm on the strings spotlights the controlled excitement of Falstaff as Quickly begins "Madame Alice Ford". "Povera donna" is another characteristic phrase here, more noteworthy because it appears in one of the earlier operas exactly an octave higher. [Ex.101]

The way in which Falstaff accepts the flattering remarks he receives throughout the opera is always a source of amusement, and no single instance is more effective than this one when Quickly says "You're a great seducer" and Falstaff, brushing it aside replies, "I am; continue." The uncertainty of the initial phrases now settles down to a flowing triplet rhythm and results in another very important little phrase which appears over and over in the opera: it first appears when Quickly tells Falstaff that Alice is always alone, "from two till three", [Ex.102] and from that moment, it is found all over the score. It is

a figure full of potential and Verdi extracts every scrap of energy from it: it is developed symphonically, but often comes back in its original state, as it does after Falstaff gives a message for Quickly to deliver to Alice.

She then takes up Cupid's bow for Meg and a completely new melody appears in Bb, but she says, Meg's husband rarely leaves her. When Quickly asks how he can bewitch such fine ladies, he denies witchcraft and modestly places all the responsibility on his charm. The original mood returns. He rewards her for her services, and addresses her in his ridiculous grandiloquent tune "Female Mercury". To their opening phrases they part.

As the orchestra reminds us of Quickly's parting phrase, Falstaff pats himself on the back for his handling of the situation, and rubbing his hands for joy exclaims "She's mine." The full orchestra takes up a new theme which embodies the spirit of Falstaff in a perfect piece of characterisation: [Ex.103] the chromatic striding of the trombones and other bass instruments catch the mood of physical self-satisfaction, his imperturbable arrogance, and his unwarranted self-confidence. He prances about the stage, preening himself after the fashion of a bird of Paradise, with all the natural grace and charm of a wildebeest. While his actual melody depicts all he imagines himself to be, the accompaniment with its jerky bassoon octave on the third beat of the bar shows the real man a jovial scoundrel, adipose and gullible. The orchestra bursts in with the introduction again but before Falstaff can either finish or start afresh, Bardolpho announces another visitor, a

Signor Fontana who has offered a flagon of good Cypriot wine to help in securing an audience.

With a nice Shakespearean tonal, the orchestra depicts a flowing brook, and Falstaff says that a brook which flows with grape juice is indeed welcome. Bardolpho goes to fetch Ford, and Falstaff has a phrase from his song. The mood changes as Ford enters and more, exaggerated greetings are exchanged as Falstaff insists that he is very welcome with an eye on the wine-bottle.

Ford begins to explain his position and reasons for troubling Falstaff. A descending chromatic phrase for the voice with Violin and oboe accompaniment belies his open nature, as he tells of his great wealth and his whims in spending it. Wealth is sufficient to delude Sir John, and "Fontana" immediately becomes "Caro signor Fontana" in Falstaff's own key of C major, while Bardolpho and Pistola are agog with excitement. [ Ex.104 ] With more ceremony, Fontana reminds Falstaff of the old proverb which says "Gold will open any door". "It's a talisman. It conquers all things." Sir John caught up in the general serious air of great philosophy says it is indeed a masterful warrior, "a fine leader" which marches at the head of the column, and the trumpets and trombones play a mock fanfare in tribute to such a fine warrior as gold. As Fontana tantalisingly waves a bag of gold the triangle jingles and adds more "weight" to the argument. Certainly Sir John will help him spend it and a reference to his strutting theme comes back with the rattle of money this time.

"Well, I'll tell you about it," says Fontana, and he recounts his problem to a charming melody, [ Ex.105 ] which would have done credit



to any of the serious operas. In particular when he narrates his unrequited love, the effect is most poignant, and it is not resolved till the over-elaborated chromatic cadence where Fontana sees himself standing on the steps of his lover's house singing a mournful ditty. Sir John, as a man of the world, understands his problem and lends his shoulder for the tears. Together they sing this "touching" song of love.

Fontana flatters Falstaff, calling him a man of breeding, prowess, discretion and ingenuity, a man of war, when we have a little military support from the orchestra to reinforce the flattery, and finally a man of the world. All this, and the promise of unlimited wealth, is too much for the mercenary knight and he accepts the offer to conquer the fair Alice for Fontana.

The sinister orchestration used for Iago appears in Fontana as he emphasises the chastity of Alice's existence hitherto. Everything seems to say "Don't dare to touch me" and he imitates her coy refusal in falsetto. Surely, if Falstaff can win her over, he himself must stand a better chance. For a start the gallant knight pockets the gold which boosts his morale considerably and in no time he is promising Fontana quick results. Fontana thanks him unconvincingly. Even now, says Falstaff, he has an appointment with the very lady, between two and three and the catching rhythm comes back. Fontana is taken aback. "Devil take her husband," shouts Falstaff, much impressed by Fontana's lack of confidence. "I'll cuckold him," he says [Ex.106] and this proves to be a very important motive. The fat knight heaps abuse on the man he has never seen yet who stands before him, as he gets caught up in

the mood of things and his own arrogance carries him away. Then he rushes off to prepare for his appointment leaving the stage to Fontana who is stupefied, not unnaturally, by the whole affair.

Ford's monologue is one of the highlights of the opera; so fine is the razor edge between comedy and tragedy in this music that I am certain Verdi must have been carried away at times. This piece is a masterpiece of construction, composition, orchestration and characterisation, rarely found in such perfection in comic opera. Stanford called it the "*Smiling* sister" of Iago's Credo, Hussey calls it "the comic brother". The paternity is certainly not in doubt!

In the introduction we can see Ford trying to sort out his problem. He has come to the Garter to teach Falstaff a lesson on behalf of his friends Bardolpho, Pistola and Caius, because he alone is unknown to Falstaff. He tries to lay a trap using his wife for bait, but just as he has almost succeeded, he finds that the plans are already fixed. Hence his confusion. "Is it a dream or is it real?" His state of mind is admirably depicted. To a wonderful rising crescendo on an orchestral scale, he feels the enormous horns, symbol of cuckoldry, growing from his forehead. [Ex. 107]. He must do something before it is too late. Backed by the four murmuring horns and a motive derived from "dalli due alle tre" [Ex. 108] he visualises his position, with everyone laughing at him and pointing the finger of scorn. The real motive which dominates the monologue has no connection with Ford, but to the snatch of melody to which Falstaff declared "I'll cuckold him". [Ex. 106]. So powerful is the music that we seem to have left comic

opera for a while, and the anger and torment of Ford as he condemns woman's infidelity is very convincing, both in vigour of the melody and in the repeated outbursts from the full orchestra. A note of comedy returns with the new figure, [Ex.109] as he recounts all the ridiculous things he would entrust to various men before he would trust his wife to herself. He again feels his head for the horns and the orchestra reminds us of his vocal phrase.

Swearing vengeance for this insult, the music returns to Eb major, in another serious moment. [Ex.110]. The orchestra closes with the motive which occurred when he sang "No one pities a duped husband."

Falstaff returns at once and the melody in the orchestra is yet another gem of characterisation which is used later on. A simple descending figure in the first violins with a light accompaniment it captures the idea of Falstaff dressed-to-kill, on his way to another victory. The pair cannot decide who should go first; each ceremoniously insists that it should be the other, till finally they go through the door together, arms round each other's shoulders. Only then does the real Falstaff come back, as the introduction to his monologue romps again through the orchestra.

Toye aptly describes the opening of the second scene in the second act as a return to *Il Matrimonio Segreto* and *Così fan Tutte* and indeed the similarity of mood is quite astonishing, as it suggests the atmosphere of the chattering women by the light staccato string phrase [Ex.111]. Mistress Quickly arrives from her audience with Falstaff and the ladies cannot wait to hear her tale. Of course Falstaff has

fallen for the tempting bait. Even the key changes appropriately to C major as she recounts her adventure in tones befitting the grandeur of such a solemn occasion. Not a detail is missed, as she mimicks Falstaff's greeting and her own "Reverenza", and tells how she has arranged the rendez-vous as planned. The triplet motive passes from voice to voice in a little flurry of excitement and expectation. Getting on with the preparations for his reception, Alice shouts for the servants to bring in the linen-basket.

However all is not hustle and cheeriness and as Nanetta comes in sobbing, the oboe touches a plaintive figure. Ford has said that his daughter must marry Caius and not Fenton and she is most upset, but they all agree about this matter and promise to help Nanetta to avoid such a fate. Nanetta is overjoyed and she now helps the others in their preparation of the scene. Alice gives out the instructions to the servants and to her lady-friends while the busy-body motive punctuates every detail. [Ex.112]

Then a new figure appears, this time  $\frac{6}{8}$ , "Gaie comari di Windsor" [Ex.113] to a light and airy melody, this time unreservedly comic-opera. Alice sings it first, and for a change it comes out like a complete verse. Then there is a short middle section, if the term does not seem too formal, where little scraps of the melody and rhythm are used while they check that all is prepared. Alice puts the finishing touches to the section, and the first tune comes back, in a three part arrangement for Alice, Meg and Nanetta. Mistress Quickly trips into the room with the news that Falstaff is almost at the house.

Alice sits down with her lute and begins to play: Falstaff enters assuming with consummate artistry the mannerisms of a bemused lover. It must be more than coincidence that Alice's greeting of "Dear Sir John" has precisely the rhythm of "dalle due alle tre", since it also occurs in the Falstaff melody which ensues. [Ex.114]

If only Ford were dead and buried she could become his lady and bear his noble title. With a real flash of comic inspiration, [Ex.115] Verdi uses the two bassoons in octaves to accompany this ludicrous suggestion. Probably the only genuine comedians in the orchestra, they make a perfect background and with their jerky rhythms and awkward leaps nothing could be more remote from his implied nobility. Oddly contrasted with this is Alice's reply, in the simple and unpretentious way in which she sketches her position, delicately declining the jewels and silks for a knotted kerchief, a simple girdle and a rose in her hair.

His advances temporarily rejected, Falstaff tells of his young days when he was page to the Duke of Norfolk, in probably the best known piece of the whole opera. It is almost the only one which can be lifted for concert performance. Even so, it is over in less than a minute. Rightly famous, even the first audiences always shouted for more and the tale is that the original Falstaff, Victor Maurel, one of opera's greatest singer-actors, always began it in a whisper and made the whole thing a giant crescendo. [Ex.116] Despite its popularity it is impossible to find fault with it because the whole is so polished. The words and the music on one side and the image of the fat knight on the

other, are so completely at odds that its comedy always charms, while the delicacy of the orchestration never fails to delight. However, the popularity worried Verdi not a little, because he could not fathom how the critics reasoned their dislike of it, and popularity usually invited journalistic criticism. The opening phrase of the melody is yet another falling fourth, tonic to dominant.

But Alice thinks he also loves Meg so he is forced to denounce her in no uncertain terms, at the same time protesting his love for Alice. Just as his attentions are becoming embarrassing, Mistress Quickly interrupts, and a new orchestral motive appears in support of the atmosphere of agitation, and this illustrates the unrest of everybody, the near-panic as Ford is sighted. [Ex.117]

Alice hastily conceals Falstaff behind the screen, and tells Meg to shout up so that he can hear all the plans. The violent crescendos and quick modulations all worked on the new motive, add to the general excitement, not a little tinged with apprehension, since Ford knows nothing about the ladies' scheme and it could be an awkward situation to explain.

This motive is now replaced by a faster-moving one as the speed quickens. Ford arrives. [Ex.118] Falstaff shouts through the hub-bub "The devil is riding a violin-bow" as indeed he is as the single line of strings flash past in double-quick time. This motive is almost continuous somewhere in the orchestra from now on. Ford has all the exits closed. Believing his wife to have tricked him, he scornfully condemns her, with harsh words. He turns everything out of the linen

basket and leaves it all scattered in his rush to find his man. A new figure derived from the present one, but a little more restful, occupies the woodwind above the rushing strings. Finally trumpets and trombones echo his shouts to search every inch of the house, and the men all hurry out.

The tension eases just a little as the strings now in C major, take the first group of semiquavers and alter it to half the original speed.

[Ex.120] The women quickly execute their plan and force the quaking Falstaff into the linen basket while he still protests his love for Alice, a sure sign that he is intent on saving his own skin. While the three women pile the dirty linen on top of Falstaff, Nanetta and Fenton appear.

The orchestra, grateful, slips into the slower  $\frac{3}{4}$  which pervades the love music of the young couple. The melody is not the same as that of their earlier appearances, but everything else is the same, the accompaniment, mood, and indeed a long continuous vocal line shared by the voices. [Ex.121]

To say that the melody is not the same, only means that it is not an exact copy. Several of the phrases are literally transposed to Eb for this episode. The lovers conceal themselves in Falstaff's old hide-out, just in time, for the old motive crashes back and with it come the men. Nobody has found anything and the search continues. Bardolpho looks behind the curtains, Caius searches the chimney. As the search becomes desperate trumpets and woodwind take the rhythm of the motive, and transform it into chromatic scales, exasperated by the fruitless search. [Ex. 122]

Then, in a moment of sudden silence, a sound is heard coming from behind the screen as the lovers kiss, but Ford and Caius hear it. Cautiously they advance towards the screen, each threatening what he will do when he gets hold of Falstaff. Above this in a triplet quaver figure; Mistress Quickly and Meg rearrange the linen in the basket to allow the fat knight more breathing space. This triplet movement makes the whole section sound  $12/8$  as the women's voices are supported by woodwind throughout while strings have only a few chords. When Ford reaches the screen, he announces that his wife and Falstaff are there, in a whisper but with an air of mystery.

Falstaff's head keeps appearing out of the basket as he moans "I'm suffocating". [Ex.123] Quickly and Meg are fully occupied in looking after Falstaff, shutting the lid on him and warning him to keep quiet. The men are now laying their plans. With the authority of a field-marshal deploying his armies Ford puts his men into position. The villagers who followed him here applaud every move, and one trumped ironically shows deference to the great tactician.

Fenton and Nanetta's voices surmount the ensemble - she in the mock  $12/8$  and he is  $4/4$ , as the women endeavour to control Falstaff, the men perfect their strategy and the chorus praises Ford's generalship. All this complicated ensemble is based upon the same motive from the men's entrance, although it is now greater, slower, and more mysterious. Nan and Fenton soar above the general throng in a beautiful unison melody in C major. [Ex.124] Ford gives the signal for battle. "One-Two-Three" and the screen is pushed over to reveal at this terrific



climax not Falstaff but Nanetta and Fenton greatly embarrassed, both of whom Ford reprimands for defying his orders.

Bardolpho catches sight of something moving on the stairs and the chase is resumed to the original motive. Alice calls the servants, and with a mighty heave they lift the basket towards the open window. The horns shake and everyone shouts in approbation as, on a huge C major chord on the full orchestra, basket, linen and Falstaff plunge into the Thames.

The first scene of the third act has the first prelude-proper in the opera. It is built on the women's chattering motive from the previous act, and the whole seems like a parody of Rossini's special claim to fame, which earned him the title Signor Crescendo, and it almost appears that Verdi is having the last laugh at the expense of the man who said he would never write a comic opera. So the prelude starts on the double basses; cellos and violas are added, then the woodwind creeps in, first clarinets and bassoons in a syncopated effect and later the rest of the woodwind, horns and first violins. Full brass and timps, supplemented by cymbals join in the long crescendo, till the frenzy halts suddenly and yet another typical Rossinian figure drops through the strings from top to bottom as the curtains open to reveal Falstaff.

A fortissimo chord in the orchestra followed by a rush of biolins announces Falstaff's shout to mine host of the Garter for more wine. There he sits, morosely ruminating on his condition. The little motive associated with Falstaff here, provides a good example of Verdi's sense of characterisation. Toye calls it a new theme, but it is certainly not.

The actual notes and the falling sequence are exactly the same as occur at the end of the audience with Ford as the dandified Falstaff appears, and the same as the "young-blade" Falstaff in *Quand ero paggio*". Here the key is even the relative minor of Falstaff's own key. The minor key and the unusual accents of the rhythm create a new picture of the fat knight, his ardour having been cooled somewhat by the water of the Thames and the clarinets, horns, bassoons, and trombones in unison draw this new Falstaff with some deft strokes. All his declamation here is a brilliant study in musical characterisation and illustration. The floating strings recall his buoyancy in the river, and the huge leaps his progress down and up when he first sank and surfaced: then again the four horns imagine him slowly filling with water. [Ex.126]

Back comes the motive again, a semitone higher, and he curses the wickedness of the world and its inhabitants. The old standards are slipping, and he tries to assert a vestige of his own unchangeable dignity with the *Va Vecchio John* tune, also now in the minor key. A snatch of the introductory theme re-appears as he recalls the vision of shrewd women, dirty linen and duckings in the river. It's too much and he yells to the landlord for a mug of mulled ale.

This he sinks thirstily. The accompaniment illustrates the warming effect of the wine as Sir John, recovers a little of his geniality under the influence of the wine. "A good wine dispels melancholy", brightens the eye and quickens the thought, and a turn on the violins emphasises his point. [Ex. 127]

Then as he explains the effects of the wine more thoroughly, the

orchestra helps him out. As the effects of the ale spread so does a prolonged trill in the music. One flute starts it, then a second, a third, violins, violas, cellos, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, horns, piccolo, timps, trumpets and basses and finally trombones and bass drum. This is a wonderful piece of orchestral virtuosity which brilliantly illustrates the text.

Mistress Quickly enters to appropriate references, on behalf of Mistress Alice. Falstaff, in his present condition is just right for this, and directs both Quickly and her mistress to the devil. Falstaff tells her his tale of woe with apt comment from the orchestra, but he will have nothing to do with her, till, protesting Alice's innocence in the unfortunate episode, she produces a letter from the unfortunate lady (another reference). This motive supports Falstaff's indecision about whether to read it, but finally he does so. [Ex.128] It is the new plot to lure him into the forest, dressed as the Black Huntsman, where Alice will meet him at midnight by Herne's Oak.

The others have crept in and watch him read the letter. Not unnaturally he is caught up in the air of mystery, the picturesque setting for their intrigue, and the whole melodramatic atmosphere. Quickly goes on to elaborate the reasons for such a meeting place. It is an old trysting place of the fairies, where Herne the hunter hanged himself. Needless to say, all the dark, mysterious features of the tale are beautifully mirrored in the music, as the sombre trombones pick out Herne hanging from a branch, and Quickly in a broad phrase, full of feigned terror, says that some believe the place to be haunted. [Ex.12]

Not unmoved by her tale, Sir John takes her inside the inn to get the whole story from her.

The others now come forward, and affected by the atmosphere of spine-chilling, blood-curdling phantoms, they continue in like mood, only suppressing their laughter with great difficulty. The orchestra too has caught the mood and the quiet taps on the drums, the eerie phrases of the bassoons and horns and the tremolando strings complete the picture as the "big" voices embroider the story. When they can no longer restrain their mirth, laughter breaks out and first Alice then all three ladies, chuckle at their latest plan.

The original mood returns as Alice pictures Falstaff in antlers instead of wearing the horns of cuckoldry: the four orchestral horns supply a beautiful obligato commentary. Then she chides her husband jokingly for his gullibility and they decide on their disguises. Nanetta will be Queen of the Fairies and a brilliant arpeggiatio figure for flute on Bb accompanies her election. Meg will be a wood-nymph, and a similar figure to the above in E major greets this, and Quickly, a witch and this is received with a simulated note of menacing on bassoons and clarinets.

As dusk imperceptibly gives way to darkness, another figure appears, [Ex.130], and Alice lays her plans carefully in a busy-body melody, with a charming accompaniment. When Ford promises Caius that he will arrange the wedding, another figure is forged from the first one, and then fragments of the two are played together as last instructions are handed out. [Ex.131] As the daylight is disappearing so does the

volume decrease in a steady diminuendo which is hardly noticeable. Finally the orchestra plays the original motive again, and an exquisite cadence from the second motive, ascending by an octave each time in the strings and with fading woodwind chords. [Ex.132]

A solitary horn-call behind the scenes activates the nocturnal magic of the last scene of the opera. The woodwind reply with the first theme of the love duet, played so delicately that it sounds fragile. Again the horn-call which seems to herald the harmless frolics of fairyland drifts on the night air, to be followed once more by the woodwind theme an octave lower. Fenton enters as the lonely horn dies away, and he begins his "aria", the only one in the opera, to a tender background of muted strings and cor anglais, again in their key of Ab major. [Ex.133] The rhythm of his opening phrase dominates the whole song, and it is not long before a harp adds the final touch of dreaminess to the accompaniment with the soft arpeggios. Imperceptibly the music drifts enharmonically into E major supported only by the harp chords, the balmy shakes of the flutes and a cor anglais doubling the harp bass. Soon the cor anglais takes over the first melody, with the voice singing a different melody, and Verdi achieves an exquisite climax at this point. The harp arpeggios ripple and as the orchestra slides melliflently its D flat, the "Boccie boccata" tune returns, harmonised for the first time, and Nanetta sings her answering phrase.

As happens throughout the opera, they are interrupted almost at once, here by Alice, who gives Fenton his disguise. Quickly dressed as a witch, follows Alice, and they hold a final conference to make sure

that Caius will marry the wrong person and so pay back Ford for ever believing his wife capable of infidelity.

Thick chords on clarinets, bassoons and horns give warning of the approach of some monster; the strings construct a short phrase in recognition of such an ungainly beast. [Ex.134] It is Falstaff clad in a generously-styled cloak and sporting a pair of horns. There seems no doubt that the whole scene conjured up in Verdi's mind a glimpse of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the glorious ass, particularly as regards this theme.

The cloak strikes twelve and Falstaff counts every stroke, quaking with fear; the motive returns, and he catches sight of Herne's Oak. He implores divine assistance, calling to his aid the deity who transformed himself into an animal and also wore horns. "Love transforms all men into beasts." The orchestra changes to a gay tripping measure and Alice approaches, Falstaff trying to eschew the fearful thoughts from his mind, starts to make love to her but she puts him off since Meg is close behind her. All he can think of now is a double conquest, but Meg arrives in a flurry shouting for help, pursued, she says, by spirits. The ladies hurry away but he cannot do anything but seek concealment at the foot of Herne's Oak.

Tremolando strings support oboe, cor anglais and clarinet as they summon the little creatures to the revels. Nanetta, Queen of the Fairies, calls them all to partake of the gathering. The ladies chorus echo her invitation, and Falstaff now quaking with fear hides his head.

A new figure, graceful and volatile, appears in the strings, with a zephyr-like group of thirds in the flutes, announces the approach of the sprites, and these figures dominate the scene as the various sprites, witches, elves, and fairies take their places, men on one side, women on the other of the giant oak. [Ex.135]

Alice gives the signal to start, and Nanetta sings her Fairy Queen song. The melody is a very model of simplicity and the accompaniment one of the most imaginative ever supplied by any composer. The virtuosity of the strings soaring in particular is amazing. First and second violins are divided and then further divided with first violin harmonies, and harp harmonies on top. The little fairies trip a slow, dainty measure, to a figure from a descending embroidered major scale. [Ex.136] Again we must note the extraordinary economy of material when a simple major scale can still weave such enchantment. Woodwind and strings treat the same phrases in turn but each produces an individual version. The whole section is repeated, before Nanetta crowns the whole inspired creation with a touch of genius, for as the lower strings and low woodwind play the falling phrase, she rises through a complete octave to end on a top A.

The mood changes as the ungainly sprites, Bardolpho, Pistola, Ford and Quickly suddenly notice the cowering bulk of Falstaff. Quickly prods the figure with her broom, to make sure it is really alive. Falstaff begs for mercy, but they mock him savagely. When they tell him to get up, he orders them to send for block and tackle. Caius is busy searching for Nanetta but Quickly manages to hide her and Fenton

in the foliage. Bardolpho invokes the sprites to attack Falstaff and he does so grandly with obvious satisfaction. They in turn roll and tumble him to very characteristic music. [Ex.137] Then the fairies take over, pinching him and thrashing him with nettles while the ladies sing another phrase, whose rhythm is like the former, [Ex.138] and Falstaff shouts in pain. The full orchestra including triangle and cymbals join in the fun as everyone helps to discomfit Falstaff.

Finally they force him to his knees, and the men calling him all the scurrilous epithets they can contrive in a rising scale demand that he confess his sin and seek absolution. Three times they ask, and three times he expresses contrition, and finally asks for forgiveness. Bardolpho says "Rifarme la tua vite" and receives a more Falstaffian reply of "Tu putti d'aequevite", as the fat knight envisages some relief from his torments.

The next portion Verdi always referred to as "The Litany" for the ladies and it is quite a complex ensemble. The ladies mockingly pray for his soul, the men shout insults at him, and the chorus sing fragments of their "torture music". There is yet another Shakespearean touch here from Boito, a characteristic pun, for while the ladies pray for the knight's soul, he asks for mercy on his paunch.

Ladies: Domine fallo casto.

Falstaff: Ma salvagli l'addomine. [Ex.139]

The men adopt a more vigorous approach and in a short section decidedly reminiscent of the priests' music at the accusation of Radames in Aida, they persuade Falstaff to vouch for his future



behaviour. The parody is complete: they do this three times, each occasion a semitone higher, exactly as in Aida. [Ex.140] Then as Bardolpho alone points out the error of the knight's ways, Falstaff recognises the voice. In the same notes used to abuse him, he now threatens Bardolpho. Finally, exhausted, he asks for respite, and Quickly seizes the opportunity to dress up Bardolpho.

Ford comes forward, and to the music of their first meeting, he asks Falstaff who is now the dupe. Falstaff recognises the voice and replies with his own elaborate greeting. As Mistress Quickly comes forward, they exchange greetings. Falstaff admits to making an "ass" of himself, which establishes the connection to *Midsummer Night's Dream* quite definitely, and all join in the laughter at Falstaff. His old arrogance returning, he points out to the assembled crowd, that while they are laughing at him, they should remember that it was his humour which sparked off the whole enterprise and they all congratulate him.

Ford has now prepared for the real revels, the marriage ceremony he intends to perform, and a charming minuet follows. [Ex.141] Toye calls it "Purcellian" and it must certainly owe its origins to the vision of Windsor forest, because there is nothing like it anywhere else. Alice leads out another couple to join the ceremony, and Ford marries both couples. But as they take off their masks there is a squeal of merriment in the orchestra and a roar of laughter in the chorus. Alice points out to her husband that he has fallen into his own trap, and Falstaff ironically asks him the same question that Ford asked him, and Ford graciously agrees with Falstaff and so does

Bardolpho because he has married Caius, while Nanetta married Fenton.

All the masks are cast aside as Falstaff leads the final chorus. Ironically enough, this master of theatrical effect chose to end his career in strict fuge, to a text which is the very air that comedy breathes, "All the world's a joke". Falstaff starts, Fenton joins, then Mistress Quickly and Alice, Meg, Ford, Caius, etc. For a man who was presumed to know little about counterpoint it is an astonishing piece of writing. Even the subject is good, traditional material, the dropping seventh, and Verdi fashions counter subjects and new counter subjects with the ease of a past-master of fugal artifice. The subject is inverted at the words "Tutto gabbato". [Ex.142] The key scheme is interesting. [Ex.143] C major, G major, A minor, E minor, A major, Eb, C major, A minor.

The old master of the theatre is still with us, and after a sop in mid-air, Falstaff seriously declaims "Tutto gabbati" and the men mournfully echo his words. Then with a violent crescendo the opera surges to a close and the orchestra rounds off everything using the fugal figure.

Only trite superlatives can describe the opera as a whole, and even these well-worn expressions of excellence are sometimes inadequate. I have tried in my analysis to emphasise the coherence of the opera which must be one of the major factors to stand out in any work. In opera, this effect of coherence or unity comes partly from the dramatic action but mostly from the musical characterisation and the thematic

a 'commentary' rather!

material. Sometimes characterisation and thematic material are so inseparably linked that it would be senseless to consider the two items apart. Characterisation is always easier to effect in serious opera than in comic opera, for many reasons. Normally the speed of dramatic action in serious opera is much slower than in comic, which gives more opportunity for musical characterisation, and the frequent soliloquies, the long arias, duets and ensembles which had been the fashion presented admirable opportunities for the skilful composer to create a musical personality for his characters. Tragedy in opera demands an effective musical characterisation to enable the audience to see a character in the flesh, and this seems to be especially true of the creation of villains. We noticed that Verdi devoted a lifetime of experience to the musical representation of Iago, to make the character musically comprehensive, but more important, dramatically consistent.

The same is not true of comic opera where the quick flow of action does not permit such painstaking musical painting as a general rule. Normally the character is just sketched in outline, with a few deft strokes of the pen, both musically and dramatically, but this is not true of Falstaff who is a character drawn in the round, musically, dramatically and naturally. Boito saw to this in part, by restoring to Falstaff the qualities the fat knight presented in Henry IV, in addition to the comic figure he cut in Merry Wives of Windsor. As a result of this we see far more than a farcical fat knight in love, in fact, as Verdi himself said of Falstaff, he created the "eternal type of the jovial scoundrel". I have mentioned most of the musical points of this

characterisation in my analysis of the opera, but it is still necessary to draw attention to the completeness of the musical characterisation. We do not see just one or two features of the man's character, his stereotyped reactions to a conventional situation, but a musical representation of the man himself as he reacts to different circumstances throughout the play. The man is essentially a "jovial scoundrel" as music and drama insist, and the roguery and good humour are always there in his musical character, even as he drags himself from the Thames.

To have delineated the other characters with the same musical completeness would have required a structure as large as *The Mastersingers*, which the composer's innate sense of conciseness and brevity would never have entertained. At the same time he could not dismiss these characters in a summary treatment because his feeling and understanding of opera forbade it. His solution to this problem was another flash of genius. In the play all the characters except Ford, act in association with others, so their characterisation would be effected on the same lines. So the women are grouped together in a collective characterisation, Alice, Meg, Quickly, and Nanetta when she appears with them. At other times she is characterised along with Fenton in the love music. Bardolpho and Pistola have one musical character, although they are often aided and abetted by Ford, Fenton and Caius. Caius is something of an exception to this general rule, and is more a character in his own right, always moaning and querulous, but the part is not exceptionally large and he is usually one among the others trying to teach Falstaff a lesson. Ford, as a musical figure, is only comparable with

Falstaff. His monologue on "Jealousy" and his music throughout the opera make of him a musical character of unusually thorough delineation.

I have already said something of the unity of thematic material in the individual sections. The compositional method is the same here as in Otello, the structure deriving from short motives, which thus establishes that musical unity so essential. Here, the style is even

What does this mean? more refined than in Otello, as much from necessity as from development of the style. The actual drama requires less set-numbers than Otello with its choruses and occasional conventional set-pieces, so the compositional technique ~~had to be~~ more refined. Unity of material persists not only within the scene, but on a larger scale, within the opera.

The development, expansion, and variation of individual motives, maintains the unity of a scene. For instance, the musical substance of the first scene of Act I is almost wholly contrived from the two figures associated with Falstaff. At the same time, the "Reverenza" theme is carried from one scene to another, while the "dalle due alle tre" figure pervades the score after the first appearance, in various guises. Some of these motives are far more than just musical germinating factors, they are gems of characterisation and pearls of musical expressiveness. It is sufficient evidence of the musical worth of the theme, that one cannot possibly say "dalle due alle tre", without automatically using the musical thought.

The device of tightening the dramatic strings by allusive motives is more apparent here than in Otello. There there were only two musical allusions in the whole opera. Here there are many more carried from act

to act, but they never become Wagnerian in any sense of the word. On this subject of musical unity, there is one fault which must be mentioned. Towards the end of the third act, the feeling of cohesion begins to slip a little because the composer to my mind introduces too much new material, which cannot be traced to anything which has gone before. This is also noticeable in performance. It is at such moments that the whole compositional method is likely to come under criticism. The enormous gain in speed of dramatic action is only possible under the cover of musical cohesion. Without such cohesion, the system collapses and a feeling of unintelligible rambling ensues. Too much new material, and I mean "new" as opposed to "derived from old" places the construction in jeopardy. The present situation never reaches such limits, but it does show the tendency. Verdi quickly recovers in the passage just after the comic torture of Falstaff and draws the musical threads together by reference to preceding material.

The whole incident would pass unnoticed in a work of inferior inspiration to that of Falstaff, but after the awe-inspiring consistency of the opera up to that point, this section does stand out. Awe-inspiring may seem to be a strange compliment, but it seems the only one appropriate to such a high level of musico-dramatic attainment. The action is swift almost to a fault, made possible only by the refinement of the vocal line into an amalgam of dramatic action and lyrical expression so perfect that we must look to Monteverde for a parallel. The musical character of the motives and their subsequent development earned the finest approval of Stanford when he called them Beethovenian. The quality of

the libretto merited the veneration of scholars who praised Boito for his mastery of Renaissance Italian, and the arrangement of the words was so perfect that Verdi accepted the libretto with scarcely a single alteration, and it is still considered the best libretto ever written.

All this rapidity of action, the consequent rapprochement of aria and recitative, and the heightened importance of the orchestra, never result in the voice parts losing their predominance or becoming unvocal extras of the orchestra. The vocal line always shows a poet's feeling for words and a musician's conception of melody. There is melody in Falstaff capable of standing beside any in the earlier operas, but here it is not formalised or organised into set shapes, it flows through the drama without impeding its creator.

It seems quite certain that there is a good deal of parody in Falstaff, parody which can never influence our view of the music because Verdi parodies himself most of all. Apart from the more or less intentional jibes at Rossini, which were justifiable on the grounds of "Jupiter's" pronouncement on Verdi, the composer parodies himself most of all. All the ensembles of plotting and chicanery seem to be having a sly laugh at Rigoletto and Ballo in Maschera. Often the ladies' melodies accentuate their tragic ancestry to increase the fun, while Ford's music has many connections with Iago's, chief of which is the instrumental-

No praise is too high for Verdi's treatment of the orchestra in Falstaff. While it still maintains its role of subservience to the voice it is wielded with the inherent artistry of a master for whom

everything must be perfect. It is no exaggeration to say that some particularly happy feature of orchestration could be cited on almost every page, and the danger of citing even one is to meet the Wagnerian criticism of "effects without cause". Never does the orchestration degenerate to this level of insincere pyrotechny, since the emphasis of the text seems to demand every effect. Some examples must be mentioned: the great trill for the full orchestra is absolutely original; so is the fairy music of the last act. This delicious essay in orchestral technique owes (absolutely) nothing to any other composer.

Over all these individual features a wonderful sense of fun presides and nothing is allowed to spoil it. That the composer was almost eighty years of age at the time is inclined to make the listener goggle in amazement tinged with incredulity. The mere fact that a man should turn out anything at an age when his coevals were either dead or senile has often been emphasised, but that a man should turn out a comedy so perfect in all its features, which was at the same time so modern, is nothing short of a miracle. If it proves nothing else, Falstaff and Otello prove that the time between Aida and the next enterprise was not wasted. As Bernard Shaw said "Falstaff is lighted and warmed only by the afterglow of the fierce noonday sun of Ernani: but the gain in beauty conceals the loss in heat - if indeed, it be a loss to replace intensity of passion and spontaneity of song by fullness of insight and perfect mastery of workmanship. Verdi has exchanged the excess of his qualities for the wisdom to supply his deficiencies; his weaknesses have disappeared with his superfluous farce."



Verdi had in fact achieved what, according to Socrates, was man's ultimate ambition "to grow wise in old age."

CHAPTER FIVE  
VERDI'S ACHIEVEMENTS

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Finally we must investigate Verdi's achievement in opera and the contribution he made to the development of the form in the nineteenth century. To do this critically we must (take particular care to) take into consideration the aims he stated and the intentions which he mentioned many times in his correspondence, and thus avoid the trap into which so many critics have fallen, namely that of accusing the composer of not doing something which he never set out to do. I have already traced Verdi's artistic origin and stressed that the only clearly discernible foreign influence is Meyerbeer while it is also safe to say that Verdi's instrumentation owes a little to Berlioz particularly in the writing for brass in the Requiem and in Otello.

The sheer quantity of Verdi's work is remarkable only in the light of subsequent and contemporary composers. Compared with his early rivals such as Donizetti he produced very little, particularly if we take into account the length of their respective careers. One thing is, however, quite certain, that Verdi spent no less time in composing than other composers in nineteenth-century Italy. We are thus forced to the obvious conclusion that Verdi's operas demonstrate a certain care for craftsmanship and attention to detail which had not particularly concerned his predecessors. Indeed, the amount of time spent on preparation of operas increased with every new venture. This is fully in accord with the spirit of the age which demanded a polished technique and attention to every detail as essential for a worthy treatment of the dramatic

↳ You draw attention earlier to the very short creative burst which produced Otello. (5 months or so)

A composer can be legitimately criticized for not setting out to do something!

material involved in opera. Meyerbeer's current lack of appeal and want of success, stems from this same basic situation, because, if we remove those features attributable to technique and leave behind only those which can stem from genuine artistic inspiration, the residue is not satisfactory, and not sufficiently strong to support the magnitude of his operas.

This is the very core of the difference between Verdi and Meyerbeer, and it is for this reason that the least technically-polished moments of early Verdi can succeed in being more moving than many of the superbly finished sections of Meyerbeer. The one enduring quality of <sup>spontaneity?</sup> much of early Verdi is the sincerity of his utterance, since no amount <sup>Non reg.</sup> of external polish can strengthen a structure which is fundamentally weak.

The habit of dividing a composer's work into three periods, early, middle and late, originally conceived by Lenz and applied to Beethoven seems to have met with universal acceptance and has many times been used to explain Verdi. What appears strange to the reader of several books on the subject of Verdi's development is the fact that no two authorities agree on its application thereby testifying either to the inefficacy of the system, or to their own ignorance of the principles behind the system. The efficacy of the system surely rests upon the ready apprehension of three quite easily discernible styles since the idea of artistic development, as

1. Personal experiment in a conventional mould;
2. Consolidation of achievement into something more individual;
3. Final synthesis;

is such a truism as to be unworthy of note.

I would venture to disagree with Dr. Scholes who classes *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore* and *Traviata* as early Verdi not because the years 1851-3 seem to prohibit such classification since the composer already had sixteen operas to his credit, but because these operas do not demonstrate the basic qualities of early Verdi namely the conventional mould of supremacy of the aria, the strong bias of patriotic feeling and all the concomitants of "number-opera".

Classification of the operas is only easy if we ignore the chronology of their composition. If we take the dates of composition into account we are left with too many anomalies to make the system workable; *Macbeth*, a strikingly progressive work stands between two thoroughly nondescript creations, *Attila* and *I Masnadieri*; *Luisa Miller* rubs shoulders with *Stiffelio*; in between *Boccanegra* and *Ballo in Maschera* resides *Araldo* of all things! Ferruccio Bonavia wisely suggests that the best line of demarcation is that which separates those operas in which the lyrical vein rules unchecked and those which demonstrate "a more thoughtful and judicious disposition of the composer's gifts and means." Such a system is eminently satisfactory but from any attempt at classification we must remove the works he wrote directly for Paris, *Vêpres Siciliennes* and *Don Carlos* because they were written to French libretti and only show the composer grappling with a medium he never fully understood; they show Verdi in his efforts to out-Meyerbeer Meyerbeer.

Those critics who speak of *Otello* and *Falstaff* as the summit of a superbly "logical development", reached "step by step" from *Oberto*

But surely these are the better because of  
mistakes learned in the others - why try to argue that he  
merely prove how little they understand the composer's development.  
experience of the lesser works was not contributing to his final <sup>165.</sup> achievement?

The years of the galley slave 1842-47 produced little we can recognize in Otello although some Italians can see everything as the product of the same genius. Otello and Falstaff are the logical outcome of Macbeth, Luisa Miller, Rigoletto, Trovatore, Traviata, Boccanegra, Ballo in Maschera, Forza del Destino and Aida. Certainly the underlying aesthetic of Verdian opera never changed. He remained true to his original Italian conception of opera where the singer predominates and the drama is played out in the vocal parts while the orchestra acts as a support which provides accompaniment and underlines features of the text. Oberto and Falstaff have that much in common.

The Verdi who wrote Falstaff was the same man who wrote Oberto, in the same tradition as the man who wrote the Barber of Seville and the man who composed Norma. What Verdi had taken from Meyerbeer soon became individualised and an essential part of the Verdi technique for operatic composition, just the same as his early choruses, although specifically indebted to Rossini, are now regarded as typical of Verdi. The process of individualisation of stylistic elements in the technique is apparent throughout Verdi's life. He was content to make use of anything which was either Italian or could be Italianised. One thing Meyerbeer had to offer which was not strictly in accordance with Italian traditions and concepts was his use of the orchestra - probably his greatest contribution to operatic history. This was not accepted into the Verdi technique until after a lengthy process of assimilation had taken place for the simple reason that it sprang from Germany and not Italy.

Whenever he mentions Italian music he usually means Italian opera and did so till the very end of his life. He believed that Italian music was and should remain distinct from all other forms of music in the world, particularly from German instrumental music and German opera. The state of musical ferment in the world worried him considerably; he could see his path forward in the Italian tradition but was exceedingly disturbed to find that other Italian composers did not possess the same powers of vision.

This then is the man who is supposed to have been influenced by Wagner; the man of whom Scholes says, when treating of Otello and Falstaff, "often styled Wagnerian because, undoubtedly influenced by his great contemporary, the composer (Verdi) has adopted a more 'symphonic' style, with some use of the principle of the leading-motive." Of Falstaff, he says: "Again we have music drama rather than <sup>overstatement!</sup> opera." These statements are totally erroneous and show a muddled conception of Verdi, Wagner and the "leading motive".

Verdi, then, was convinced that there was a future for opera in the true Italian tradition. Throughout his life, his correspondence sets forth his views in a wholly admirable manner. He was no theorist and no aesthete; firmly convinced that personal opinion was the ultimate arbiter of taste in operatic matters, he never allowed his head to rule his heart. His attitude to contemporary composers is one of his most admirable traits; whether the composer were French, German, Italian or English, Verdi did not miss a great deal in his appraisal of their work. — *what Wagner's?*

He had a considerable affection for Berlioz which we can witness in his correspondence. A letter to Arrivabene dated 1882 gives a just and fair appraisal of Berlioz:

"Berlioz was a poor sick man, rabid against everyone, bitter and malignant. He had a great genius, a keen sensibility and a feeling for instrumentation. He anticipated many of Wagner's orchestral effects, though Wagnerians will not admit it. He was without restraint and lacked the calm and equilibrium which produce perfect works of art."

Verdi gave similar treatment to all composers around him. When the news of Wagner's death reached him in 1883, he could only write:

"Sad, sad, sad! Wagner is dead. When I read the news yesterday, I was, I must confess, overwhelmed with grief. Let there be no mistakes: a powerful personality has disappeared - one that will leave a lasting imprint on the history of art."

After the works of Puccini had been strongly recommended to him (doubtless by Boito and Ricordi) Verdi wrote to Arrivabene in 1884:

"I have heard the composer Puccini well spoken of ... He follows modern tendencies which is natural, but he remains attached to melody which is above passing fashions. It appears to me, however, that the symphonic element predominates in him. There is nothing amiss in that, but here there is a special need to tread warily. Opera is opera: symphony is symphony. And I do not believe that it is good to introduce bits of symphony into an opera simply for the fun of making the orchestra dance."

Hans von Bulow, one of the greatest musicians of the age had cause to cross Verdi's path at the time of the Requiem Mass (1874). <sup>u</sup>Below, who had come to Italy on a musical tour, made some scurrilous attacks on the Requiem in various Italian papers. Certainly this did not worry Verdi but it must have stayed on Bulow's conscience for many years, so much so that, several years after the event he wrote a long and involved letter to Verdi, confessing his previous fault. I quote in full:



"Hamburg. 7th April, 1892.

"Illustrious Master,

"Deign to hear the confession of a contrite sinner! Eighteen years ago the writer committed the crime of making a great - a great journalistic blunder against the last of the five great kings of Italian music. How often has he bitterly regretted that mistake (for when he made that mistake, for which your magnanimity will perhaps have made allowances, he was out of his senses, if you will forgive the mention of the extenuating circumstance. His mind was blinded with fanaticism, by an ultra-Wagnerian prejudice. Seven years later, he gradually came to see the light. His fanaticism was purged and became enthusiasm. Fanaticism is an oil lamp: enthusiasm, electric light. In the world of the intellect and of morals the light is called justice. Nothing is more destructive than injustice, nothing more intolerable than intolerance, as that noble writer, Leopardi, says ... A recent performance of the Requiem, though it was a poor one, moved me to tears, I have now studied it not only according to the letter which kills, but according to the spirit which quickens. And so, Illustrious Master, I have come to admire and love you. Will you absolve me and exercise the Royal prerogative of forgiveness? ... Faithful to our Prussian motto, Suum cuique, I cry: Long live Verdi, the Wagner of our dear allies!"

It is a far cry from the spirit of the earlier censures by von Bulow; when writing of the same work he could only say:

"A passing, contraband glance at this new emanation of *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata* removed from me any desire to be present at this festival."

Then the day before the first performance of the Requiem, he wrote in an Italian paper:

"The second event of the season will be tomorrow, the performance of Verdi's Requiem in the Church of San Marco, theatrically suitable, exceptionally conducted by the composer, Senator Verdi, with which the omnipotent corruptor of Italian taste hopes to sweep away the last remains of Rossini's immortality, inconvenient to him."

Verdi certainly read or heard all of these statements but to the letter above he made his usual moderate reply:

"There is no shadow of sin in you, and there is no need to talk of penitence and absolution. If your opinions have changed, you have done well to say so: not that I should have dared to complain. For the rest, who knows? ... perhaps you were right in the first instance. However that may be, your unexpected letter, coming from a musician of your worth and standing in the world of art, gave me great pleasure. And that, not out of personal vanity, but because it shows that really great artists can form judgments without prejudice about schools and nationality and period. If the artists of the North and South have different tendencies well, let them be different. Every one should maintain the characteristics of his own nation, as Wagner has most happily said. Happy you, who are the children of Bach! and we? We, too, children of Palestrina, once had a great school - and today? Perhaps it is corrupt and in danger of falling to ruin! If we could only turn back to the beginning."

This correspondence, while explaining the relationship which existed between Verdi and von Bulow also serves to explain, in a nutshell, his whole attitude towards German music and the influences it was having on contemporary Italian music. Verdi's attitude to German music has often been presented in an exaggerated manner and this totally without foundation. Verdi had profound admiration and respect for German instrumental music and indeed for German music in general, although it is quite often stated that Verdi had no time for any German music, when, in fact, he stressed that he had no time for Italians who were trying to copy German music. He qualified most of his praise of German music; he had no scruples about saying that he found parts of the B Minor mass dull, and that he found the last movement of the Ninth Symphony exhibited bad workmanship in places. What he warned Italian composers about was trying to shield their own compositions under the auspices of Beethoven. He rightly said that, whereas they would assimilate the weaknesses of the last movement of the ninth symphony, they

would never rise to the heights encompassed by the first three movements. These are the natural sentiments of a man who believed that the genius of Italian music was essentially vocal. Time and time again we come across these views in his letters to his friends on the state of Italian music.

"20 March 79.

"Dear Arrivabene,

"All of us, composers, critics, and the public, have done our utmost to renounce our musical nationality. We have reached a fine end: one more step and we shall be Germanized in this as in almost everything else. It is some consolation to see that on all sides Quartet Societies and orchestral societies etc are rising to educate the public in what Filippi calls the Great Art. Still, a very unhappy thought occurs to me every so often and I say under my breath: But if we in Italy were to form vocal quartets to sing the works of Palestrina and Marcello and their contemporaries, could not that be Great Art?

"It would be Italian art ... The other, no! But enough, no one listens to me."

In another letter, also to Arrivabene, this time dated 1875, he gives his views on the state of Italian music:

"I am unable to say what will emerge from the present musical ferment. Some want to specialise in melody, like Bellini, others in harmony like Meyerbeer. I am not in favour of either. I should like a young man, when he begins to write, never to think about being a melodist or a furutist or any other of the devils created by this sort of pedantry. Melody and harmony should only be means to make music in the hands of the artist. If a day ever comes when we cease to talk of melody or harmony; of Italian or German schools; of past or future etc - then perhaps the kingdom of art will be established ... You say that my success is due to a fusion of the two schools. I never gave either of them a thought."

Writing to Arrivabene in 1882 about the elements of musical composition Verdi says:

"Opinion on musical matters should be liberal, and for my own part, I am extremely tolerant. I suffer the melodists, the harmonists, the bor ... shall I say those composers who would bore us at any price for the sake of bon ton. I admit the past, the present, and I would the future, if I knew it and thought it good. In a word, melody, harmony, declamation, florid vocalization, orchestral effects, local colour (an overworked expression, often used as a cover for a deficiency of ideas) are but the raw materials of music. Make from these materials good music, and I will suffer them one and all, of whatever sort. For example, in the Barber of Seville, the phrase, 'Signor guidizio per carita', is neither melodic nor harmonic; it is declamation exact and truthful - in fact, music."

His views on musical education are also interesting in the light of his own composition. He was constantly being asked to sit upon National Commissions for the reform of music-teaching throughout Italy and just as constantly he refused the offers. Briefly, his ideas were these: a strict training and plenty of hard work; strict counterpoint and constant fugal practice; a historical culture. The student who endures such a course and has genius in him "will end by accomplishing that which no master could ever have taught him". It is interesting to note that this was precisely his own musical education, with the exception of the "historical culture" which he doubtless regretted later in his life.

To accuse Verdi of turning Wagnerian in his later operas was an easy way for the critics to conceal their ignorance and astonishment. There is not a single trace of one device to which Verdi owes any debt to Wagner.

The original charges of Wagnerism may be traced to the Belgian critic Fetis who, as early as 1857, scented in Boccanegra an essay at "the music of the future of contemporary Germany". From that date each

*You have not argued this successfully. See my note on pgs. 121.*

successive opera was greeted with the same cry by many of the critics, particularly those outside Italy and this angered Verdi more and more till he was prepared to give up composition altogether after Aida. Many of the letters to his close friends in this period of his life mention the futility of further composition, and "a life-time in the theatre to end up as an imitator", showing just how much he was injured by this wrong-headed criticism. Whenever Verdi managed to confuse the critics, whenever he was not immediately intelligible the critical retort appears to have been "Wagner!"

*y*  
*ks*

The critical error in this case arose from the inability of critics to isolate Verdi and Wagner, the two greatest operatic composers of the century, from the artistic milieu in which they worked. To Wagner, (undoubtedly the greater genius of the two) were attributed all those features which his work embodied alike where he was following an artistic tendency and where he was blazing a new trail. In other words the age was born of Wagner and not Wagner of the age. Wagner himself encouraged this belief by confessing openly his debt to Beethoven alone and by heaping abuse on the heads of all other composers. Meyerbeer in particular, whose influence upon Wagner in the early works is most marked, who was a friend and benefactor to the young unknown Wagner in Paris, was held up to the scorn and ridicule of the world in a typical outburst of fiendish nastiness of the sort that eventually gave birth to Nazism.

The complete inability of German historians to distinguish the man and the age in an effort to view Wagner's achievements in

perspective, was carried over in English musical histories by men equally overawed by Wagner's greatness. In copies of standard musical histories we frequently meet:

"People were amazed to find many lessons from Wagner embodied in these works: [Otello and Falstaff] the plots were developed in continuous music through the whole scene, the musical style was made flexible to the dramatic situation in the way that Wagner advocated ... Verdi's art had always been serious and always been great, but only in these works did he through Wagner's example, find a way of couching it which was altogether worthy of its greatness."

[Colles - Growth of Music, Part III]

Similarly in another general history aimed at a large reading-public: "Verdi, the Italian melody-maker par excellence, had at eighty years old, learnt from Wagner, both in true artistic dramatization and also in actual method [e.g. plastic, continuous, tuneful recitative for the voices, a whole musical fabric of real value etc.] yet had not dried up his own great melodic genius and had retained all that is best in Italian opera (in his case, partly inborn, partly acquired). [Scholes - Listeners' History of Music, Part II]."

Of the earlier operas, the same author writes: "all were in the conventional Italian style, until, in 1871, he produced Aida", and the Oxford Companion to Music says that "Verdi freely adopted Wagnerian devices", mentioning the use of leit-motive. One more pearl of English musical history must suffice:

"In 1871, Aida showed that he was contemplating an entire change of style; three years later followed the Manzoni Requiem, and in 1887 and 1893 he crowned his old age with the two masterpieces Falstaff and Otello [in the wrong order]. They show better than any other operas of the time the influence which Wagner was beginning to exercise on the

European stage, and it speaks highly for both composers that Verdi at the age of 74, could entirely abandon the methods which had won his early popularity and adapt himself to new aims and to far more exacting conditions."

[Hadow: Music, p.210]

This refusal to see the lines of development in Verdi himself is a state worse than the critical blindness it is usually held to represent. There could never have been such an assembly of critical blind-spots had the eyes scanned Verdi's works with a fraction of the thoroughness the Germans lavished upon Wagner's. The attitudes explained above are possibly all the more disturbing in that they imply a certain misjudgment of Wagner as well. "Continuous music", "plastic-tuneful recitative" etc. were not Wagner's prerogative. If we concede that a "musical style flexible to the dramatic situation" demands the label of "Wagnerian", then Gluck and Monteverde were Wagnerians. The particular contributions of Wagner to opera, the real testaments to his greatness, namely the orchestra as the vehicle of the inner-drama with its polyphonic sub-structure of leit-motives providing continuity and unity; the endless melos of the vocal line; his conceptions of the "myth" as significant material; of the Gesamtkunstwerk as the art work of the future; these are the only features of Wagner's work which can be termed "Wagnerian". Anything else was Wagnerian only in the manner in which Wagner used it, not by its very nature.

Wagner created the leit-motive as a compositional method but he did not thereby own any rights on the use of a theme as a musical reminiscence. Indeed if this were so, we are faced with the astonishing statement that Mozart and many other operatic composers are all

Wagnerians. Verdi had used the musical reminiscence technique as far back as *Ernani* and he never rejected it because it was a powerful tool in his hands, one of the ways in which opera scores over spoken drama. The kiss-theme at the end of *Otello* is one of the most heart-rending instances of Verdi's use of this technique, yet nowhere is it anything other than a musical allusion, a psychological reminiscence.

Similarly, wherever the action of the opera demanded it, Verdi presents us with continuous music. Act III of *Rigoletto* plays without a break, as does the Nile Scene in *Aida*, to cite but two of the more obvious examples. The last two operas are new only in the sense that the drama in each demands the consistent application of continuous music; indeed a break in *Otello* would totally ruin the steady heightening of the tension, and would reduce *Falstaff* to the level of a "peep-show".

Very little has been written about the harmonic idiom that Verdi employed in his later works although treatment of the subject with reference to the earlier works is quite lavish in the condemnation of the poverty of the harmonic invention. It is still not rare to read of tonic and dominant accompaniments enlivened from time to time with diminished sevenths, arranged for an orchestra which strums like a giant guitar, and this is only too true of many passages in the early works. Yet, it would be quite wrong to assume that this state of affairs persists in all of the operas. Anyone who seeks to prove the charge of harmonic poverty would immediately light upon the Finale to Act II of *Aida* with its Grand March and many pages of harmonic



triviality even as late as 1871. But this section is exceptional in Aida where many pages testify to an extremely modern type of harmonic treatment, the invention of a man who was well aware of the possibilities opened up by chromatic harmony.

The critical error in this case has been to judge Verdi's harmonic invention using Tristan as a yardstick with the inevitable consequence that the German composer appears by far the greater composer. No sane person using real standards would doubt the German's superiority for an instant, but then these real standards are features like chromaticism in perspective as an essential ingredient in Wagner's conception of music drama, and as another means of illustrating the drama in Verdi's operas. The critical wheel has turned full-circle when we are led to believe that chromaticism is, per se, good. The fallacy is complete.

As soon as chromaticism establishes itself as the norm it surrenders its birthright since it ceases to be in the true sense of the word, chromatic when there is nothing basically diatonic for it to colour. The infinite yearning which is Wagner's Tristan exists only by virtue of the strong basis of tonality which supports the chromaticism. Without this firm foundation the chromatics become purposeless wanderings incapable of expressing anything other than vagueness or a certain beyond-this-world feeling. Thus chromaticism with Wagner served a dramatic function.

It performed a similar service in Verdi's last operas, although here it was never pervasive because the drama never demanded it. Here, we see two aspects of chromaticism as applied to opera for we have the

fiendish, satanic chromaticism of much of Iago's music and also the tender, melting chromaticism of the love music between Otello and Desdemona. Much of Iago's music is chromatic only in the sense that the melody is chromatic while the harmony remains diatonic, or in his "asides", absent altogether. This may well be an illustration of his character, the corruption hidden beneath a fair exterior. The love music is chromatic (in the harmonic sense) even where it supports diatonic melody as it does at the opening of the love-duet. [Ex.144] This is brought about by chromatic alteration of essential harmony notes as can be seen in the example above, and is again well-illustrated in the so-called kiss-motive. [Ex.145] Where the vocal melody of the love music is chromatic it is often the result of one of the basic characteristics of the composer's practice, the juxtaposition of major and minor in the same key. [Ex.146] The chromaticism of Otello is dramatic, and is used in much the same fashion as Wagner used it in Tristan, but whereas the chromaticism in Tristan is the drama, in Otello it is only aspect of the drama, an important one but by no means the only one. If the surrender to chromaticism in the love-music of Otello is nowhere as complete as it is throughout Tristan we would be well advised to bear in mind the different types of love the two works illustrate before trying the comparison too far.

I have noted elsewhere the fluidity of the tonality in the more dramatic sections of these operas and stressed that in the more lyrical episodes the tonal picture is much more stable. Like chromatic harmony, modulation is used as a means of emphasising dramatic tension. When

*No mention of fact that strong diatonicism throws occasional chromaticism into sharp relief - for dramatic effect!*

Otello arrives at the quay-side in Act I there is a violent shift of the tonality to C sharp major; when Iago utters his villainous asides there is usually a side-slipping of tonality. These are both features which Verdi preserved throughout the opera and which he used whenever he wished to focus attention on the nobility of Otello, or on the baseness of Iago.

As a general rule Verdi makes no great play at avoiding perfect cadences, being content to secure the necessary continuity of the individual sections by skilful overlapping of the joins effected by continuity of musical material, and introduction of new characters to the scene before the first scene is played out, thus avoiding a full-stop in the music. This method is eminently suitable to the relatively short acts of Italian opera where no time is given over to interludes or long illustrative sections in the orchestra. One of the more obvious advantages of the Italian system is that the interrupted cadence can still have some dramatic effect since it is not being constantly employed to keep the music in motion. Verdi uses this cadence with great skill, usually preparing the way for a perfect cadence by establishing a pedal-point before he side-steps violently into a new key.

Alongside his fondness for major and minor in the same key he demonstrates a certain affection for chains of  $\frac{6}{3}$  chords, sometimes sevenths; a particularly good example occurs in the love duet in Act I at the words "How sweet it is to remember". This same effect appears in Puccini who reduced it to a mannerism.

Modulation by means of enharmonic change is an important feature in both of these operas and examples of the technique are abundant. At the end of the love duet the key is E major and a harp arpeggio outlines this while the strings hold G sharps; the tonality pivots on E and G sharp while the harp suggests C sharp minor and the music dissolves into D flat major at letter ZZ, a magical effect full of that "melting tenderness" which characterises the love music. Similarly in Act IV after Desdemona bids good-night to Emilia the orchestra closes the scene with a slowly-falling chromatic line against the original flute motive in Cor Anglais and horn and just as the music is prepared to step into G sharp minor it slides instead into A flat major for the Ave Maria [Q]. These are just two of the best examples; both seem just right for the occasions. The technique never degenerates into mannerism, because it does not occur every other page, so the effect is always moving.

All these features, the chromatic harmony, continuous music, the development of germinal motives, the fluid tonality, the increased importance of the orchestra, help to confirm these two operas as works of the late nineteenth century and nothing more. Verdi made no pretence to being a learned composer but he was alive to <sup>(includes Wagner)</sup> every contemporary development in music and the last operas prove this. Single-handed he raised Italian opera from the formula of Donizetti and Bellini to the form of the final works, works different in conception from but in no way inferior to the music drama of Wagner. The sixteen years which separate Aida from Otello were the years during which Verdi refined his technique; in these years he worked hard and long to enable himself to

produce two works which exhibit a consistency of inspiration and a mastery of technical skill rarely equalled in opera. There is not a serious flaw in either work; nowhere does his inspiration fail him, leaving him at the mercy of sheer technique. He had never spent so long in preparation for a new opera and the quality of both *Otello* and *Falstaff* in every detail shows that this was time well-spent.

The works are still, however, singer's operas, and the drama is always played out in the vocal line and re-inforced by the orchestra. Statue and pedestal never change places, nor did they with Mozart, despite Gretry's dictum. I have drawn much attention to the quality of the melody in both operas, and the variety of that melody. It is always keenly expressive of the emotions which govern it, but never merely expressive or un-vocal. Formal melody appears less and less till in *Falstaff* there is very little of the old style left. Nevertheless the vocal line is never quite without form, and never sets out to achieve "endless melos".

Verdi achieves his most poignant effects by the use of appoggiature in the vocal line. *Otello's* melody *M'hai legate alle croce* is a good instance of the appoggiatura expressing pain [Ex.147]. All these methods or suggesting or illustrating certain emotional qualities in music have been most carefully classified and tabulated in Cooke's *Language of Music*, even down to exhibiting in-coming and out-going feelings and those which show emotion in a state of flux. Suffice it to say that in every case his examples illustrate exactly the emotional situations in *Otello*. The *cor anglais* melody [Ex.148] with its

"tragic anguish" is a basic term as is the incoming "pleasure" of the kiss-theme. There are effects brought about by the resolution of appoggiature. There would seem to be no point in listing all the other melodies to prove that the emotional situation is always audible in the melody.

I have emphasised the chromatic and insinuating quality of Iago's melody. Otello employs melody of a much wider sweep, flowing melody but with many wide leaps, in fact heroic declamation. It is only when he is angry that the melody comes in short, sharp, biting snatches. Desdemona on the other hand uses a simpering ingenuous turn of melody which shows a certain predilection for thirds [Ex.149]. Rarely are there any big leaps, or a wide-span to the melody. When these occur they do so because she is frightened [Ex.150] or because something a little less innocent is needed to have an effect upon Otello.

Although what Deryck Cooke has aptly labelled "basic terms" is common property, for the invention of which no composer can claim responsibility, we can estimate the originality of a composer in the manner in which he uses these basic terms. We have seen how Verdi fashions a fine long-breathed melody from the simplest of motives in the Finale of Act III of Otello and how that same simple figure is the essence of the whole section. This is surely where his genius lay, in the ability to construct melody charged with feeling and to support it with an equally expressive orchestral commentary. The last two operas are different only in that they display these features far more consistently than any of the others.

It would be well for us to consider for a few moments the vast differences between Verdi and Wagner so that we can finally put an end to the talk of Wagnerisms which has persisted with many people who possess an imperfect knowledge of both composers. There are many differences which spring to mind as soon as the two names are mentioned, yet the best comparison of the two composers is that given by P. H. Lang, in *Music in Western Civilisation*. The operas or music dramas of Wagner are characterized by the predominance of the full symphonic orchestra, over which the vocal parts were written in endless melody. For a start, the music dramas of Wagner are concerned with mythical figures from Teutonic legend: all this is bound up with problems of metaphysics and world-outlook. The germ of the musical construction is the leit motif from which everything springs: the chromaticism of the harmonic idiom is extremely involved without obscuring the underlying tonality. To contrast all this with the Verdi technique makes plain the fundamental differences in the two composers. The orchestra never predominates in the Verdian opera. The core of all the operas lies in the vocal line as it had done as far back as Bellini and Donizetti. All of the Italian's operas are singers' operas and no amount of increased orchestral interest and orchestral technique is allowed to detract from that basic precept. There is no endless melody in the operas of Verdi. Verdi never merged aria and recitative to an extent that endless melody was a practicable idea.

The heroes and heroines of Verdi's operas are human beings, and this helps to account for their great appeal to the public. There is

What does this mean exactly?  
Previously you argue that his system  
is "mystic".

no hidden world, no mysticism behind the Verdi opera. Verdi never adopted the Wagnerian system of leit-motives or even came near to doing so. He had no use for the method, since his technique of composition was not symphonic. Quite often, even in the earlier operas we have themes which are associated with some particular character or with some particular emotional conflict but these themes are never treated in the Wagnerian symphonic manner. We know that similar themes were used as far back as Mozart in Don Giovanni and even further back than that. To accuse Verdi of being Wagnerian in his use of leit motives we must also concede that Mozart, Weber and many others were Wagnerians. Verdi never travelled as far into the realms of chromaticism as did his German counterpart, but, at the same time, he was aware of the uses of the idiom as we can see from his work in the later operas. D. J. Grout [Short History of Opera] in his comparison of these two composers, writes:

"There is about Verdi's music a simplicity a certain Latin quality of serenity which the complex German soul of Wagner could never encompass. It is in essence a classic, Mediterranean art, self-enclosed within limits which by their very existence make possible the perfection."

Verdi's orchestra, even at its finest, never predominates. Left to its own devices as it sometimes is, in preludes, it can be a superb creator of atmosphere, [Prelude to the last scene in Falstaff, to the Nile scene in Aida, the preludes in Traviata], a wonderful illustrator of evocative mood-music. Used with voices, it never rises above the level suitable to accompaniment, although it follows every shade of the text. The raising in status of the orchestra in Italian opera is one of Verdi's most notable achievements; from the big guitar of the early

Is Wagner  
symphonic?  
another  
catchword  
I'm afraid  
which you  
ought to  
have  
spelled!



operas to the masterly orchestral technique and mixing of sonorities obvious in the late operas is a huge step forward. He certainly profited by Wagner's development of the orchestra, but Wagner himself owed a great deal to his predecessors and contemporaries in this field. Even the symphonic North found that they could not play Beethoven as they had played Haydn.

At  
Last!

The increasing importance of the orchestra in opera in the nineteenth century forms a good example for the point which I wish to stress. Wagner did not imitate this raising in status; he merely followed it. Then it was itself labelled Wagnerian, so much so that anyone else who took a similar interest in the orchestra was not up-to-date, but Wagnerian. The same attitude is demonstrated in the increased importance of the drama as the motivating force of opera to which every other aspect was subservient and its inevitable result, continuous music; here again Wagner followed rather than led in the first instance.

Indeed the similarities between Verdian opera and Wagnerian music drama which so misled contemporary critics are just those features which are the properties of an epoch and not the prerogative of any one man. Once the composers in question have received their initial artistic liberation from the communal spring and we have noted their mutual debt, we can see that their separate and individual solutions to the eternal problems of opera, the balance between poetry and music, voice and orchestra, have nothing more in common. The voice predominates in opera, the orchestra in music-drama, while in both forms music succeeds in rising above poetry, in Verdi's case because he knew it had to be so, in Wagner's because he could not help it.

I leave the last word on Verdi's development to a section of Hanslick's review of an early performance of *Otello* in Milan in 1887:

"Have you ever examined an old ivy plant attached to a tree or to a wall? You will find that its first, lowest leaves change their form near the middle of the trunk: the jagged outlines become rounder and disappear entirely in the thin leaves at the top. It is the same plant with a three-fold re-forming of the leaves. With this picture I should like to answer the familiar question, whether Verdi, in his *Otello* had become an entirely different composer. He has remained the same, the old un-damaged trunk, although in the long course of his growth the leaves have gradually changed from their original form. The sharp, challenging rhythms and melodies of his first period are more rounded in his second. In *Aida* and *Otello* they achieve noble simplicity. He who has steadily followed Verdi's development will perceive in *Otello* a further growth of the same trunk; there has been no grafting, least of all with anything from Bayreuth."

Bernard Shaw in an essay entitled "A word more about Verdi" in the *Anglo-Saxon Review* makes the point that if Verdi cannot be explained without reference to German composers then he cannot be explained at all.

Despite all the references to Wagner and to Verdi's indebtedness to German music in general, there never appears to have been any real doubt that both the last operas were great works, although I suspect that a great deal of lip-service has been paid to this opinion, particularly with regard to *Falstaff*. *Otello* is the greatest tragic opera ever written by an Italian; it is the greatest because it represents the highest achievement of technical craftsmanship, the perfect marriage of words and music, and a level of musical inspiration which seldom falls below the sublime. It is a drama of white-hot passion which unfolds steadily and logically, sweeping all before it to a climax so moving in its intensity and pathos that it leaves the listener

with a deep feeling of "the pity of it". All this is done in a form which Wagner had buried thirty years before, the singers' opera.

Falstaff is a further refinement upon the same technique, if anything more perfect in the wedding of words and music, voice and orchestra, yet it has never achieved the same popularity as Otello, because it is so much more difficult to appreciate. Not only is everything so perfect but it all takes place so quickly. There is hardly a page of slow tempo in the whole opera, and the kaleidoscopic qualities of the action demands an attention such as few are able, not to say, prepared, to give. It is probably the musicians' opera and while such an epithet in no way minimises the work's greatness, it certainly mitigates against the general acceptance of the work by the public as a "great work". How ironical it is that the most popular and universal composer of the nineteenth century should complete his artistic career with the most aristocratic and refined comedy ever written!

Point of view backed by basically sound argument, but often spoiled by wild, exaggerated statements which become contradicted, usually in the next paragraph.

The commentary on the operas does not really serve the purpose intended. A closer analysis and categorising of musical characteristics would have substantiated your arguments better. The stuff on the collaboration & the libretti is well-written.

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