

Scene VI: That's Entertainment (1842-1865)

As composers began moving slowly away from the “Bel Canto” model, they discovered that they still had to play by some of the rules established by those composers for the simple reason that those works had attracted a very large paying public, and since opera was very expensive (even then) to produce and European countries had not yet established massive arts subsidies to underwrite such productions, impresarios had to feed the kitty and operas based around the Gluckian model were well out of fashion.

I know that's a pretty long sentence, but it pretty much sums up what was developing in opera. Even the most high-minded composers had to keep audience appeal in mind; it's just that some were more successful at it than others. Hector Berlioz, bless his maverick soul, tried to win a mass audience for his comic opera *Benvenuto Cellini* in 1837, when Bel Canto was still king, but the music was just a bit too strange rhythmically for a general audience and it failed. Ironically, it was none other than Gaetano Donizetti who felt sorry for him, writing in his diary, “Poor Berlioz! He tries so hard, but he never seems to succeed.”

By the early 1840s, a new Italian composer was slowly but surely on the rise: Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). By his own admission, he wasn't a transcendent genius; he had to work hard at his craft, but he had good instincts and, slowly but surely, came to grips with elements of *bel canto* while ever-so-slowly trying to inch away from it. At just about the same time, a new German composer, his exact contemporary, was combining elements of Gluck and Meyerbeer with touches of Bellini in a new style that was also inching its way towards fruition, Richard Wagner (1813-1883). In a little over a decade, these two composers would come to dominate their respective fields of opera, but whereas Verdi had to continue to pay court to public opinion in order to get his works performed, Wagner wheedled his way into the good graces of various members of royalty who underwrote his works, eventually giving him an entire theater all his own to play in. This naturally freed him from the constraints placed on not only Verdi but everyone else who was still working in the real world. One reason why Wagner was lucky whereas Verdi was not was because he started basing his operas on old Teutonic and Norse legends, a rather exotic field which had never been tapped before, whereas Verdi, like the Bel Canto composers before him, based his works on popular novels with their swashbuckling heroes, exalted Spanish Doñas who fell in love with them, and equally noble but evil Dons who were the swashbucklers' rivals for the lady's hand. Eventually this became a formula that trapped Verdi for more than 20 years, but in the beginning it all seemed new, fresh and exciting.

Wagner: *Rienzi* (1842)

Although composed between 1838 and 1840, *Rienzi, der letzte der Tribunen* did not see a performance until October 1842 in Dresden (thanks to the recommendation of Giacomo Meyerbeer), so I consider it an 1842 opera. Drawn on his fascination for Meyerbeer's long grand operas and including elements of Bellini and Gluck, it was one of the composer's few “hits” among his stage works. In Dresden alone, it was given its 100th performance by 1873 and its 200th by 1908, and was regularly performed, often in a shortened version, throughout Europe and America. Although I will be discussing the remainder of Wagner's output in a separate chapter devoted to him, I feel that *Rienzi* belongs here since its style is much closer to the bel canto style out of which both he and Meyerbeer came.

Even here, in his youthful years, Wagner was guilty of creating, as was later charged against him by certain critics, “exciting moments and long half-hours.” He “poured music in quarts and gallons” on the plot, which at most should have lasted two hours, which stretched it out to nearly five. (At the world premiere, it ran closer to six hours, which led Wagner to do

something he rarely did later on, which was to cut a good amount of the music.) Even in its “abridged” form, it includes ballet music that lasts nearly a half hour, but as usual with Wagner there are some outstanding moments that at the time were wholly unique in the opera world.

Rienzi also sees Wagner first use of melodic fragments which are associated with specific characters, what he later called “leitmotifs.” The long, legato trumpet call at the very beginning of the overture is, we learn later, the battle cry of the Colonna family.

The opera, naturally, takes place in ancient Rome, the first of many Wagner operas set in the distant past. Cola Rienzi, the Tribune of Rome, is hated by the Orsini and Colonna clans; Paolo Orsini and a group of supporters attempt to kidnap Rienzi’s sister, Irene, but Stefano Colonna, one of the few members of his clan who supports Rienzi, stops them. Rienzi’s appearance stops the fracas going on; the people support Rienzi wholeheartedly against the nobles. Stefano’s son Adriano and Irene are mutually attracted to one another, but Irene stops short of promising marriage as she feels that her brother needs her constant presence and support.

The patricians plot Rienzi’s murder, of which Adriano is horrified. Rienzi greets a group of ambassadors for whom he presents a length entertainment (the 40-minute ballet). Interestingly, Wagner tried to make the ballet relevant to the story line by making it the story of Tarquinius, the last Roman king, who attempts to rape Collatinus’ wife Lucretia—the same story later used by Benjamin Britten for his 20th-century opera. By Act III, the patricians have recruited an army to march on Rome. The people are frightened, but Rienzi organizes them and leads them to victory over the nobles. During this battle, Stefano Colonna is killed and Adriano swears revenge. In Act IV, Cecco del Vecchio, a Roman citizen, discusses the negotiations between the nobles and the Pope and German Emperor with other citizens. Adriano’s desire to kill Rienzi wavers when the latter arrives with Irene by his side. The Papal Legate Raimondo announces that the Pope has issued a ban on Rienzi and plans to excommunicate his associates.

In the last act, Rienzi sings his famous prayer, “Allmächt’ger Vater,” confirming his faith in the people of Rome to protect him. He suggests to Irene that she seek safety with Adriano, but she does not. Adriano enters and tells them that they are in danger because the capitol is to be burnt to the ground by the nobles. With the capitol on fire, the fickle public turn on Rienzi, ignoring attempts to speak. Adriano rushes in, trying to rescue Irene and Rienzi, but the building collapses on all three, killing them.

After the 13-minute overture, the first thing we hear, surprisingly, is a peppy tune in D major for the conspirators, with Irene issuing a few “Help me!” yelps in the background...a surprising lapse in taste for the usually fastidious Wagner, but there it is. Yet even here, there are small musical gestures that immediately tell you that this is Wagner and not Meyerbeer. At Rienzi’s entrance, however, the music suddenly becomes more serious, even authoritative, and when the faster music returns it is now churning in a minor key. The chorus of the people is also peppy, but here Wagner keeps shifting both tonality and rhythm frequently (including some rising chromatics) to create the kind of chaos that is dramatically appropriate for this scene. When the chorus re-enters, he also does some interesting rhythmic shifts. As was common for Wagner, the music never comes to a complete stop; it just keeps shifting and morphing. This was his gift to future composers, a complete break from the shortened-scene tradition. Now we hear a choral section that presages similar music in *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. Already, at age 27, Wagner was a master composer if not always a prudent one in terms of his operatic dimensions. Moreover, as the scene continues to morph, it achieves greater dignity; even in the soft passages, there is a majestic sweep to the music that marks it as different from his predecessors.

In an opera of such length, describing each scene in turn is a fool’s errand; it’s much better to just listen to it, and you’ll hear all the remarkably subtle music and inspired dramatic moments in the score. Perhaps the most important thing about *Rienzi* is that, for all its incredible length, it

completely avoids the feeling of trashiness that infected the poorer sections of the operas that preceded it. *Now* we can look back on it and notice the things that didn't work, but for its time, the whole opera was inspirational, almost (as in the case of many of his operas) a religious experience, not in the conventional sense of God-worship but rather in that it completely envelops your senses and replaces the reality of the mundane world with something that is clearly on a higher plane. The Rienzi-Irene duet that ensues, for instance, even includes some music that one could identify as sung recitative, yet somehow Wagner makes it all sound melodic, of a piece, and inherently dramatic. Interestingly, a great deal of Rienzi's music is centered around E and F, just below the "break" in a tenor's voice, and although the music occasionally ventures to a high note here and there, it does not stay there. Thus he also found a way to maximize the quality of the tenor voice without forcing it to keep above the break. Irene's music is more varied and excitable, but it, too, emphasizes the quality of the voice without hammering the ear with high notes. Wagner had already found a "happy space" for his singers. Since this opera includes a rarity for Wagner, a soprano-in-drag role for Adriano, we also get the very rare opportunity to hear him writing duets for the two sopranos, and they are really exquisite. And for the most part, he chose quick tempi for much of this first-act music, which keeps the audience on its toes. And cleverly, when the chorus of people enter, they are singing one of the themes from the overture. An offstage organ leads into an *a cappella* offstage chorus, and this music sounds properly religious in character. Everything dovetails neatly to create a sonic universe for the listener to bask in. This is music that transports you. Not that there aren't moments in *Rienzi* where you say to yourself, "Enough already! Get to the point!" but here Wagner's youthful fount of inspiration spilloth over.

In Act II, one hears in embryonic form the kind of long musical "dialogues" that Wagner would later create for *Lohengrin*, *Tristan* and the *Ring* cycle, except here he uses the more conventional form of his day: a parlendo of declamation over stop-time orchestral chords. Interestingly, this is one of his few nods to the style of Gluck, who he admired but evidently wanted to improve upon. He does so by moving out of the stop-time *parlando* dialogue with a surprisingly restless, more fully developed orchestral accompaniment, clearly looking forward to his other operas, and when he returns to the stop-time orchestra there are modifications to the orchestration including soft pizzicato strings and soft, mid-range trumpet chords. He was already changing the sound of the orchestra in his time, and in my opinion it is a shame that he only left us one symphony. Just as Mahler was, as Leonard Bernstein said, a born opera composer who only wrote symphonies, Wagner was a born symphonist who chose to write mostly operas. By omitting some of the less interesting passages, a clever arranger could easily make a symphonic structure out of most of Wagner's operas, *Rienzi* included.

What surprised me the most after hearing this work, however, was how well his symphonic structures worked in conveying the drama of the words. In nearly every scene, Wagner somehow avoided the mundane or the simple solution, yet the music is still attractive to the average listener despite all of the innovations. A friend of mine once told me that if a modern composer were to write music identical to *La Traviata*, presuming that Verdi's *La Traviata* did not exist, it would be hailed as a masterpiece. I disagree; *La Traviata* has only five moments of real dramatic music in it, and in both form and substance it sounds old-fashioned today, beautiful as the music is, but in the cases of *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer* I might accept his judgment because in many ways, these works still sound somewhat modern, at least in terms of musical innovation and continuous form. The music of those operas only sounds "old" because it's been around for nearly 200 years, not because Wagner's music, like that of the bel canto composers, has dated so badly. Charles Handelman, a fine amateur baritone whose primary interest was Italian opera, commented later in life that after decades of listening to opera, Wagner stood out from everyone

else as THE supreme genius of his time, “every note of it.” And he was right. Even in the crowd scene in Act II, where the music is bouncier and more conventional in form, Wagner’s harmonic restlessness and innate feeling for form comes through, making these music sound far less “rat-a-tat” than their Italian counterparts. Only a few moments in early Wagner sound expected or formulaic and, despite his innovative idea of putting a story to the ballet, it is this music that is the most ordinary and dated of all, pretty though it is.

Again, in the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king. The only fully complete recording of *Rienzi* is the 1976 BBC studio performance with John Mitchinson (Rienzi), the virtually unknown soprano Lois McDonald (Irene), Lorna Haywood (Adriano), Raimund Herinx (Paolo Orsini) and conducted by Edward Downes. At the moment, the entire performance is available for free streaming on YouTube.

Verdi: *Nabucco* (1842)

After the failures of *Oberto* (1839) and *Un Giorno di Regno* (1840), it didn’t look as if Giuseppe Verdi was going to be around very long, but near the end of 1841 he completed an opera that premiered early the following year to stupendous acclaim.

Nabucco was based not only on several books of the Old Testament—2 Kings, Jeremiaiah, Lamentations and Daniel—but also on an 1836 play by Auguste Anciet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu. Oddly, however, a simplification of the play for a ballet presentation in 1836 became a more important source for librettist Temistocle Solera than the play itself. Like Rossini’s *Moïse et Pharaon*, *Nabucco* was a metaphorical opera meant to protest Italy’s continued occupation by foreign forces, but also like the Rossini opera, the political implications were subtle enough for it to pass the censors. Nonetheless, the chorus of Hebrew slaves from this opera, “Va, pensiero,” had much the same effect on Italian audiences as the “Preghiera” from *Moïse*. Italian audiences “got” its message and went wild every time it was performed.

Listening to a first-class performance of it today, one can easily assess young Verdi’s strengths and weaknesses as a composer, and although the latter did exist they were far fewer than those of the Bel Canto composers. For one thing, Verdi was not shy about using minor keys much more frequently than his predecessors. He also had an absolutely uncanny knack for writing propulsive rhythms, even in slow passages, that kept the musical flow moving while the music, scene to scene, was much more interconnected than in even the best works of Bellini, Rossini or Donizetti. This forward musical flow helped keep audiences interested even when the stage action was static. You might love, like, or hate a Verdi opera, but one thing you could never say is that any part of it was boring, or didn’t fit into the musical scheme of things.

Moreover, Verdi could concoct melodic lines that held the listener’s attention without sounding cheap or inane, and like so many late Bel Canto operas, his use of coloratura decorations was kept to a minimum. His sopranos (and sometimes his baritones and tenors) would be given runs to sing, and perhaps even one or two trills, but it always seemed to match the mood of the drama. It may be a bit too close to popular Italian musical forms for some listeners’ tastes, but it was interesting.

So where did he come up short? Two ways. First, and most consistently throughout most of his operas of his early and middle periods, although the constant flow of arias, duets, trios, choruses and ensemble pieces matched the *general* mood of the drama, they had little or nothing to do with the actual words being sung. In other words, the music was exciting on its surface but *only* on its surface. In the entire first scene of *Nabucco*, thrilling as it is, not a single note or phrase mirrors the actual words of the Israelites’ prayer as the Babylonians advance on them. The high priest Zaccaria tells the people not to despair but to place their faith in God...all well and good, but unless God prefers to hear bouncy Italian rhythms while they pray to him, there’s

nothing in the music to match the actual drama in the words. Even when Abigaille, purportedly Nabucco's elder daughter, enters, singing her killer music (it was said to have ruined the voice of many a soprano in the 1840s and '50s), one feels the *undercurrent* of drama but not a single phrase that mirrors the actual words she sings. What Verdi did, then, was to create a sort of Italian dramatic symphony that included singers to support the drama onstage while remaining completely separate from the meaning of the words. One might think, for instance, of very good and dramatic movie music backing a scene showing World War II fighter pilots or battleships wreaking havoc on their German or Japanese enemies. The music is thrilling, it matches the mood of the scene, but if there were any complex thoughts going through the pilot's or the gunner's head, which is where real drama occurs, it was lost and buried by the thrill of battle.

The second way in which Verdi revolutionized Italian opera in his time was to exploit the high ranges of his sopranos, mezzo-sopranos, tenors, baritones and even basses. Realizing that the revolutions in singing which had happened during the Meyerbeer era had tremendous appeal to audiences, he placed their average vocal lines, what singers call the *tessitura* of a role, higher than it had been with the Bel Canto boys. Ironically, he himself learned a lesson from what the role of Abigaille did to sopranos and backed off a bit in his later operas; many of the high notes we hear and accept as part of the score simply aren't in there, but singers know that audiences love those "money notes" and so they continue to toss them in, like red hot pepper sauce on an already spicy meal. Playwright and music critic George Bernard Shaw complained bitterly about this in the late 19th century, but to no avail. The die was cast, and singers simply were not going to back off from throwing high Cs, Ds, E-flats and even Fs into music where they simply did not belong. Although once he became a famous and powerful composer, Verdi himself tried to stop this practice (more on that later), in a way he was to blame for getting it into their heads in the first place. One an audience goes crazy over one high note, why not toss in a few more? After all, since you're not "really" performing opera as drama, what difference does it make?

Now I will be the last to say that Verdi's early operas, particularly *Nabucco*, are not well written within their own individual style. Whereas Rossini had his little trick of the slow-but-sure crescendo, Verdi had his little trick, the closing ensemble scene of an act in which a steady, almost pounding rhythm would be varied slightly (think of the final section of the *Guillaume Tell* overture as a predecessor), set to music that had not just one but sometimes two or three of the principals going up to high notes together; this is what we hear at the end of Act I of *Nabucco*. And again, it's as thrilling as all hell, don't get me wrong. But it is NOT opera as drama, any more than the closing pages of the *Guillaume Tell* overture are really dramatic.

Yet here, as in nearly all of his better operas from this period, there are moments where Verdi not only caught the mood of an aria but also its nuance, and believe it or not, Abigaille's killer aria in Act II is one of them. This is music modeled to some extent after Elettra's mad scene in *Idomeneo* and, as we shall see, Verdi had the greatest respect for Mozart, even more so than Gluck, and built much of his music on the Mozartian model in his own personal style. What Verdi took from Mozart and fused with his own personality was the earlier composer's ability to concoct melodic arias and scenes that, at the very least, reflected the dramatic mood (think of "Il mio tesoro" or "Mi tradi" from *Don Giovanni*) without sounding trashy or cheap, and in this respect he succeeded. It wasn't always real drama, but it was clearly better than most of what the Bel Canto composers came up with. As much as I like Rossini's choral prayer from *Moïse*, Verdi's "Va, pensiero" is better: a more interesting piece with its prayer-like opening contrasted well with the more vigorous middle section, and a more interesting rhythm.

Like his later *Il Trovatore*, each of the four acts of *Nabucco* has a title: Part 1, "Jerusalem"; Part 2, "The Impious One"; Part 3, "The Prophecy"; and Part 4, "The Broken Idol." Yet unlike *Trovatore*, in which each act has its own individual musical "feel," the different acts of *Nabucco*

seem very much alike. This, too, was a dramatic error, but in the heat of an actual performance it made little difference because all of the music was exciting and thrilling, and that was all that mattered. The Act III duet, “Sapressan gl’istanti d’untra fatale,” shows us another of Verdi’s innovations, the ability to create duets (or trios) using the voices in counterpoint to one another. Again, it’s background music to the actual drama, but at least it’s brilliantly crafted background music.

In really well-conducted performances, Verdi’s early and mid-period operas, *Nabucco* included, have a structural unity often missing from earlier works, particularly most of Donizetti’s serious operas. In short, Verdi’s operas have *musical integrity*, something that Rossini achieved in two operas, Bellini and Donizetti in one opera each. (Meyerbeer, even in his more entertaining works, generally had better musical integrity, but not, to my ears, as consistently as Verdi.)

Thus I want the readers of this monograph to understand that although I may not give Verdi the highest marks for achieving opera as drama, I do give him points for being a more serious composer who at least tried, within the conventions of his day, to produce works of art. Sometimes he failed miserably—think of *Il Corsaro*, *I due Foscari* and some of the other “galley years” operas—but more often than not he failed partially, some times less noticeably than at others.

The performance of *Nabucco* I recommend is not one that is commonly available, but a 2011 performance on YouTube featuring Leo Nucci (Nabucco), Csilla Boross (Abigaille), Dmitry Beloselsky (Zaccaria), Antonio Poli (Ismaele) and Goran Juric (Gran Sacerdote) with the Rome Opera Chorus and Orchestra conducted by Riccardo Muti. It’s the tautest, most exciting performance of the entire opera I’ve ever heard. Also, although Boross belts out every written high note in the score, she does *not* include the one at the end of her Act II aria, which is *unwritten*.

Wagner: *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843)

This was another case of a work written earlier not premiering until four years later. Wagner insisted that he wrote *Der fliegende Holländer* in 1839, and it makes sense; in a way, it is in a more “retro” form than *Rienzi*, using formulated *da capo* arias for the Steersman, Daland and Erik; even Senta’s famous aria, thought it breaks the mold stylistically, is in *da capo* form. Interestingly, it is also one of Wagner’s most tightly written works; other than *Das Rheingold*, I can think of no other Wagner opera that moves as swiftly and has less slow, time-filling narrative passages than this one. As in the case of *Rienzi*, Wagner had Meyerbeer to thank for getting it produced, which is all the more ironic considering how nastily he turned on his mentor in later years simply because he was Jewish.

Even the opera’s overture is taut and concise, despite its slower section in the middle, and unlike both his Italian and German counterparts of the time, he used themes that would later appear in the opera, identified with arias or sung passages by specific characters—again, a nascent version of the *leitmotif* idea. Also of interest is the way Wagner uses the basses in the orchestra (and sometimes the violas), giving them “rolling” passages to play in order to suggest the movement of waves in the ocean. He was to expand on this sort of representation of nature in his later works to good effect, but it’s already here, in 1839.

Holländer is also unique, in my own personal view, for its almost constantly driving, near-violent musical progression. In no other Wagner opera is there this kind of continual underlying menace; only a few moments in the opera really “feel” calm or normal. This creates a psychological drama in and of itself, independent of the drama in the text and whether or not the music reflects it as such. Only Gluck in certain scenes of his operas (the opening of *Iphigénie en Tauride*,

for example) and the Wolf Glen scene in Weber's *Der Freischütz*, in earlier operas, creates this kind of psychological tension.

Moreover, Senta's character is extremely interesting. She has an unnatural fixation on the Dutchman, a semi-ghostly figure doomed to sail the ocean forever unless he finds someone to love him. Why? What's her reason? She already has a suitor who loves her dearly and wants to marry her, the hunter Erik, but it seems that it's exactly because the Dutchman represents mystery and a touch of danger that she only wants him. In the very interesting 1984 Bayreuth production of this opera, the director depicted Senta as a young woman on the verge of madness, so fixated on the Dutchman that she couldn't really think or function normally; this was one of the few instances of a modern director really looking into the mind of a character and coming up with something that, although not explicitly stated by the composer, was really implied by him.

After the Steersman's rather conventional aria, we get a wholly unconventional one, the Dutchman's "Die frist ist um." This is Wagner at the peak of his powers, creating a structure that is both musically and dramatically innovative. This music could not possibly be about anything other than the lyrics it is set to; not only every word, but every syllable, is matched in accent by the orchestra. Indeed, one of Wagner's most innovative ideas in this opera was to make all of the Dutchman's music sound somehow abnormal, as if it came from a different place than that of the other characters—although Senta's continually tense state of mind is also brought out in *her* music, and the heightened tension of these two characters is made clear by the more conventional music written for Daland, Erik and the Steersman. Cleverly, he makes this contrast even in the Daland-Dutchman duet, the former singing bouncy little conventional opera figures while the latter is singing a long-lined melody in its own separate world.

There are two ways to play Senta: fairly safely, as just a young woman in love, or as someone who, even from her entrance aria, is someone on the edge. I prefer the latter; it just feels right for the character.

This may seem like a diversion from the topic, although I think it germane to our discussion, but *Holländer* even sounds fresh and revolutionary in a performance where the singers don't quite bring out the character and/or the conducting is somewhat stodgy or conventional, such as the 1960 recording with Marianne Schech as a matronly-sounding Senta and the fairly slow, routine conducting of Franz Konwitschny. The dark, driving spirit of this music is simply irrepressible, from the opening of the overture to the moment when Senta throws herself off the parapet. For me, the only uninteresting music in the entire opera is the long section of choral music in the last act, just before the final denouement; it just feels intrusive and, well, conventional compared to the rest, but even with this, in a performance with great conducting and a fully involved cast, the effect is almost overwhelming. There are two such in my experience, both from live performances at Bayreuth: a mono recording with George London (Dutchman), Leonie Ryanek (Senta) and Josef Greindl (Daland), conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch, and the 1986 performance with Simon Estes (Dutchman), Lisbeth Balslev (Senta) and Matti Salminen (Daland), conducted by Woldemar Nelsson. Of course the Nelsson recording is in digital stereo, but in some sections it's not quite as good as the Sawallisch version.

***Meyerbeer: Le Prophète* (1849)**

We finally return to Meyerbeer, who had produced only one other opera since *Les Huguenots* in 1836, the now-forgotten *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien* of 1844. This was a rare bomb for Meyerbeer, a *singspiel* designed for Jenny Lind who unfortunately couldn't make the premiere because she was singing in Stockholm at the time. *Ein Feldlager* received only five performances before it disappeared forever. Thus, in a sense, Meyerbeer had to prove himself worthy of the Parisian public once again with this work. In my view, it is his dramatic masterpiece.

The source of the libretto was a strange one for Meyerbeer: a passage from Voltaire's *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations* on the life of Jean of Leyden, an Anabaptist leader and "King of Münster" in the 16th century, although his librettists, Eugène Scribe and Émile Deschamps, altered and expanded on Voltaire's sketch to create a much more interesting story. It should not be thought, however, that Meyerbeer lollled around for a decade before starting work on *Prophète*; on the contrary, he and his librettists had been working on it for more than a decade, changing, honing and refining both text and music until it reached the point of perfection that Meyerbeer wanted in it. The final product is a fascinating look at religion and how it picked and chose its prophets, heroes and martyrs, in many ways undermining the belief system of many faithful Christians, yet it remained a very popular opera until the early 20th century, where it was last performed at the Metropolitan Opera by Enrico Caruso in 1918.

A careful reading of the libretto shows how the drama was created. In Meyerbeer's version, Jean of Leyden (he used the French form of his name) is a devout Christian who knows his Bible inside and out, prays daily, but has no particular urge to proselytize. The primary movers in his life are his mother, Fidès, and his sweetheart Berthe, a peasant girl who he plans to marry. But according to local law, Berthe must get permission from the local count, Oberthal, to wed. She and Fidès approach him and ask his permission, but Oberthal is in a surly mood that day and refuses to grant permission because he wants a "comely lass" like Berthe to remain single and entice the men. When she and Fidès object, they are arrested and thrown into a dungeon, which puts Jean in a depressed frame of mind.

So here come these three Anabaptists who are trying to get the populace to help them overthrow Oberthal."Hey, Jean," they say (metaphorically), "we heard what happened with your mom and your girlfriend. But you know, you can get even with Oberthal and get them back."

"I can?" asks Jean. "How?"

"Well, we'll tell you. Since everyone knows you're very religious and read the Bible every day, we'll announce that you have been chosen by the Lord to be his Prophet, and that you'll lead the people to victory over Oberthal. After all, you do look like the picture of King David in the Münster Cathedral. They'll obey you since they trust you and, after all, obeying you will be like obeying God, you know? Once Oberthal is overthrown, you can free your mother and girlfriend, and everything will be fine."

At first Jean refuses, wanting only to love and have Berthe, but at that moment Berthe herself, having escaped along with Fidès, rushes in; hard on her heels is Oberthal himself, who threatens to execute Fidès unless Berthe is returned to him. Glumly, Jean agrees to this; Fidès blesses her son and tries to console his grief, but when the Anabaptists return, he agrees to become their Prophet.

The remainder of the opera is a fascinating psychological study in how to control people's minds with religious claptrap. In Act III, for instance, when Anabaptist soldiers bring in a group of wealthy, richly-clad captives, they want to execute them, but Mathisen, one of their leaders, stays their hand, telling them that it's much better to wait until they've received ransom for them, *then* kill them—thus double-crossing those who would try to get them back. Farmers arrive, skating across the pond with food bought with money stolen from the captives. [The skating scene was another "miraculous" stage innovation of its day, since of course you couldn't have actual ice on the stage.] Then the Anabaptists decide to invade and control Münster itself; unfortunately they fail, and the returning crowd is rebelling against them until Jean calms them down, inspiring them by singing how the King of Heaven ("Roi du ciel") blesses them for their efforts and will assure them a place in heaven if they continue to listen to the Anabaptists.

In Act IV, Jean now has higher sights than merely Prophet; he wants to make himself Emperor after he and the peasant crowd have indeed conquered Münster. Fidès appears, dressed in

rags; not recognizing her son as the Prophet at first, she begs for alms to have a Requiem mass said for Jean, who she thinks dead. Berthe also arrives, wearing rags, as Fidès tells her of finding Jean's clothing covered with blood. Later, at Jean's coronation, it is asserted that he was not born of woman but, like Christ himself, a miraculous birth caused by an angel. Fidès arrives to curse the Prophet but, when she hears him speaking, she recognized his voice and cries out, "My son!" Having to play a role, however, Jean denies that he even knows her; he declares her demented and says he will cure her, miraculously, of her dementia. Fidès denies this, but then Jean tells his followers to stab him if this beggar woman calls him her son again, so Fidès stays silent.

But Jean has underestimated the depths of treachery which the Anabaptists are capable of. They plan to hand him over to the German Imperial forces about to invade Münster and reclaim it in order to protect their own hides. Meanwhile, soldiers drag Fidès to prison where she is torn between love for her son and unbridled disgust at what he has become. She is willing to forgive him while praying for her own swift death when he suddenly arrives to see her. Out of sight of his followers and the Anabaptists, Jean apologizes to his mother for the way he had to treat her in public, but she tells him the only way she will forgive him is if he gives up his title and power. Jean agrees to this. At that moment Berthe arrives to steal a powder keg and blow up the palace and everyone in it, but she recognizes Jean and throws herself into his arms. A soldier suddenly arrives to warn Jean that the Anabaptists, with the Imperial troops, have invaded the city and are planning to kill him. At this point, Berthe finally realizes that Jean and the Prophet are the same person; she curses him and then stabs herself to death.

Having lost the only woman he loved, Jean decides to die as well but also kill all his enemies at the same time. While the Anabaptists drink and sing of the glory of the Prophet, Jean stealthily enters, telling his soldiers to seal up all the doors on his order. He encourages one and all to get drunk; suddenly, Oberthal appears, demanding that the false Prophet be killed at once. The Anabaptists, ready to be rid of Jean, willingly agree to this. But Jean has already given his signal; all the exits are shut and sealed off as Jean lights the powder kegs. The whole palace explodes (another great stage effect) into roaring flames as Jean throws himself into his mother's arms and all die. Thus no one gets out of this dastardly religious sham alive.

Onto this extraordinarily dark plot, Meyerbeer lavished not only his most dramatic and interesting music, but knit it together in a manner similar to Wagner but using simpler themes and harmonies. Thus *Le Prophète* is not a forward-looking work, but it is extraordinary within its style. There are leitmotifs for Jean (his love song for Berthe), Fidès, even the Anabaptists knitted into the score. The music for the three Anabaptists is quite fascinating in itself, sounding something like a minor-key religious dirge from the 15th century. Indeed, the cross-pollination of various musical styles is so rich and so complex that one must actually hear how it was done to appreciate the subtlety and complexity of it all; and on top of this, Fidès' fourth-act aria, "O prêtres de Baal," is in its entirety one of the greatest musico-dramatic pieces of the mid-19th century. When he went to hear *Les Huguenots*, Hector Berlioz marveled at how brilliant all the music was, arias, duets, trios and choruses, but since he attended the world premiere of *Le Prophète*—along with Chopin, Verdi, Théophile Gautier and Eugène Delacroix—he must have been overwhelmed. Except for the ballet on the icy lake, Meyerbeer consciously avoided trashy, meaningless tunes to delight for their own sake. Although the work is clearly his—no one else could have written it—I have a feeling that his exposure to Wagner's brilliance in 1842 and '43 may have prompted him to create a tighter structure than he had previously.

Unfortunately, he would not achieve this kind of structural unity and dramatic integrity again. Whatever it was that inspired him in *Le Prophète*, he lost his mojo in his last works. *L'Africaine*, premiered posthumously, has many fine moments but nothing in it that holds together half as well as in *Prophète*.

For many listeners, the live performance with Marilyn Horne as Fidès, Nicolai Gedda as Jean and Margherita Rinaldi as Berthe is THE performance of this opera, but there is some music missing and I simply cannot tolerate the stodgy, step-by-step conducting of Henry Lewis. Instead, I recommend the live performance with John Osborn (Jean), Sofia Fomina (Berthe) and Kate Aldrich (Fidès), conducted by Klaus Peter Flor on DVD, although since it is missing some bits of music you may wish to fill these in from the otherwise inferior studio recording that Osborn made for Oehms Classics.

Verdi: *Stiffelio* (1850)

Verdi's 1849 opera *Luisa Miller*, the first of his operas taken from a play by Friedrich von Schiller, was produced at the San Carlo Opera in Naples, but he had such bad experiences dealing with their management that he vowed never to write another opera for them—and he didn't, despite originally writing *Un ballo in Maschera* ten years later for that house (he withdrew it from them for the premiere).

Interestingly, the opera Verdi originally offered to San Carlo as a sequel was to be based on Victor Hugo's *Le Roi s'Amuse*—an opera, as we know, that he did eventually write and named *Rigoletto*—but he decided not to pursue it at the time. Instead, he approached his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, with the idea of writing an opera based on Shakespeare's *King Lear* with Salvatore Cammarano as the librettist, but by June of 1850 he realized that the subject was beyond Cammarano's abilities and so withdrew it. In its place, he settled on Émile Souvestre's novel *Le Pasteur d'hommes*, which the author had converted into the play *Le Pasteur, ou l'Évangile et le foyer* in collaboration with Eugène Bourgeois. According to Wikipedia,¹ this was a bold choice since it was “a far cry from the melodramatic plots Byron and Hugo: modern, ‘realistic’ subjects were unusual in Italian opera, and the religious subject matter seemed bound to cause problem with the censor [although] the tendency of its most powerful moments to avoid or radically manipulate traditional structures has been much praised.”

For this opera, Verdi worked with Francesco Maria Piave, but of course there were problems with the censors; as the premiere, suggested for Trieste, approached, Verdi was ordered to change the title character from a Protestant minister to a “sectarian.” In addition, the final scene, one of the finest Verdi ever wrote, had to be changed from Stiffelio reading a passage from the New Testament in which Jesus forgives a woman's adultery to something much more banal and not referring to a Biblical excerpt. Verdi and Piave had no choice but to accept this, thus the premiere took place as scheduled on November 16, 1851, but both composer and librettist were so angered by these changes that they felt there was no point for Ricordi to stage the opera elsewhere unless they could restore some of its original meaning—which was forbidden. Angered, Verdi gave up on *Stiffelio*, later turning it into a “crusader opera” titled *Aroldo*.

Verdi's autograph score wasn't discovered until late 1992, after which a new critical performing edition was prepared by mid-1993. This is the version that has been used in performances ever since, but most of the changes from the version familiar to opera lovers since the early 1970s are in the text, not the music itself, which is virtually identical. Thus if an earlier recording of this opera is superior dramatically to one of the newer ones, it can be listened to as long as you have a copy of the amended libretto and can imagine the different words being sung.

Yet appreciating the innovations in *Stiffelio* depends on your having an understanding of Verdi's musical style in 1850. He was finally emerging from his “galley years,” but despite scoring a few hits with *Ernani*, *Nabucco* and *Macbeth*, he had yet to write an opera with overwhelming popular appeal. This was due, in part, to the fact that at age 37 he felt he had established him-

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stiffelio>

self enough to write an opera more or less on *his* terms although, of course, he had to include a certain amount of “bouncy” music to please the masses. Thus *Stiffelio* was a test piece for him, the chance to write an opera mostly on his own terms but with some “ear candy” in it to gain popular success.

The contemporary drawback of *Stiffelio* was that although the music was lyrical, none of it was memorable. In the case of the more serious set-pieces, this was done by design, but in failing to write music that would appeal on a larger scale to those audiences who wanted Tunes to Hum on the way out of the theater, as Verdi did in *Ernani*, *Stiffelio* was doomed to fail. Learning his lesson, he made an effort to include memorable tunes in all of his following operas, which he did—sometimes to the detriment of dramatic function, but he did not do this in *Stiffelio*, which contains some of his most sophisticated music prior to *Don Carlos*. Thus it really didn’t matter how much the censors crippled its dramatic impact; it would never have been a “hit.”

The plot is only a bit convoluted. Compared to *Il Trovatore*, it is fairly straightforward, but being based on a French play which probed the psyche of the protagonist—one might call this the first psychological opera in the Italian style—and not a knee-jerk emotional reaction for revenge, this, too placed *Stiffelio* outside the operatic conventions of its day. But of course Italian opera singers of that period were clearly out of step with the subtleties of the plot, in which the only attempt at death was that of Stankar, Lina’s father, deciding to kill *himself* because she had disgraced him in the eyes of his peers and his church. Here, again, we have a conflict of style, in this case the crux of my book, *dramatic* style; and there is no better indication of this than the etched drawing on the title page of Verdi’s piano-vocal score, in which Stiffelio is clearly in a “Get-thee-behind-me-Satan!” pose while Lina is kneeling at his feet, supplicating for mercy. It’s such a corny stereotype on what passed for “drama” in the Italy of Verdi’s time that it says far more than I could about how primitive the concept of drama-in-music was back then.

Since the conventions of his time demanded it, Verdi opens *Stiffelio* with an orchestral prelude, but a very long one that isn’t very interesting throughout. It does, however, have a few interesting features, such as the playing of flutes and pizzicato strings in double-time counterpoint to the stately melody played by a solo trumpet, a tune which is broken up quite startlingly by a dramatic outburst by the strings and brass, but then he has to spoil this effect by suddenly moving into one of his peppy oom-pah tunes. This frustrating need to entertain his audiences will pop up again throughout the first act, and there is nothing in the plot to suggest that such moments are appropriate, let alone necessary.

Fortunately, the opening scene with Jorg, an old minister contemplating the Bible and Stiffelio, who finally arrives back from his self-imposed exile, has some excellent music. Dorotea, the cousin of his wife Lina, tells him that a boatman has been looking for him; Stiffelio knows it must be Walter, who told him about a stranger jumping from a window of the castle in what was probably a secret liaison. Walter has recovered the man’s wallet but Stiffelio, not wanting to get involved in such a slimy affair, throws it into the fire without looking at it. Lina and Raffaele, however, look alarmed; her father, Stankar, immediately guesses that they are the clandestine lovers. Raffaele tells the anguished Lina that he will set a secret meeting with her, sending a message locked inside a copy of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock’s epic poem *Messiah*. All of this music is set to appropriately grave, dramatic music, Jorg’s monologue underscored by bowed basses and viola tremolos, but bouncy music greets Stiffelio’s arrival. Nonetheless, there is considerable musical variety in this opening scene, including some nice *sotto voce* sung counterpoint which indicates something going on under the surface. Most interesting is Stiffelio’s ensuing aria, “Vidi covunque gemere” (“Everywhere I saw virtue”) which, rather than being a straightforward aria with repeating strophic lines is actually a duet in which Lina continually interrupts

and interacts with him:²

The image shows a page of a musical score for an opera. It features three systems of music. The first system is for Lina, with a tempo marking of ALLEGRO and a metronome marking of M.M. ♩ = 120. The lyrics are: "Cie-lo, che orror! -tà. Le in-ge-nu-e cu-sto-di del pu-do-re, le". The second system continues the vocal line for Lina, with lyrics: "don-ne, rotto il vin-co-lo del con-ju-ga-lea-mo-re... Ah!... Ben lo so, per-". The third system is for Stiffelio, with a tempo marking of ANDTE and a metronome marking of M.M. ♩ = 66. The lyrics are: "-do-nami; il quad-ro è troppo or-ren-do... ma-ti ri-vedo e ap-pren-do che an-cor-v'è fe-del-". The piano accompaniment is marked ALLEGRO and includes various rhythmic patterns and dynamics.

There is considerable musical and rhythmic variety in this “aria,” which I consider to be one of Verdi’s very finest, catching the shifting moods of the protagonist and the meaning of the words extremely well—even a moment when he suddenly stops and completely changes the mood from a contemplative *legato* melody to a *stretta*. Though set to fast music, this section is not shallow music; it keeps shifting between major and minor, even when Lina re-enters for a few bars. It is something that Verdi never repeated in any of his later operas, at least not to this extent and certainly not in such an imaginative way. Towards the end, Stankar, too, enters for a few lines to make this duet a trio, and this moves without a pause to a *stretta* for Lina alone which again morphs without a break into a lovely and plaintive aria in which she asks God to forgive her sin; and this, in turn, leads into a scene in which Stankar suddenly appears, catching her reading a letter which he demands to see. Yes, some of this music is in Verdi’s oom-pah style, but here it suits the drama, and he keeps interrupting both the rhythmic flow and the tonality with sudden shifts of key, meter and tempo. If this still sounds to some ears a bit too *Traviata*-like, one must remember that at this point not only had Verdi not written that opera but in fact had not seen or heard any of Wagner’s mature works. He was still building on the foundation of Donizetti, but doing so in a much more creative manner with truer dramatic feeling.

Yet the highlight of this act is the eight-minute finale which, following a chorus celebrating the return of Stiffelio to their midst, includes all of the principals whose thoughts and spoken words continually crisscross each other, often with exquisite (vocal and instrumental) counterpoint. Jorg, suspecting Federico to be Lina’s seducer, tells this to Stiffelio, who picks up Klopstock’s *Messiah* and asks Lina to open it with her key; the message falls out, which Stankar quick-

² Source: https://vmirror.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/1/10/IMSLP24547-PMLP55371-Verdi_-_Stiffelio.pdf

ly picks up and rips to shreds. Stiffelio, furious, yells at Stankar for this action, Lina begs him to respect his old age and Stankar covertly challenges Raffaele to a duel. This scene is almost as complex, and as good, as the Act I finale of *Don Giovanni* by Mozart, a composer who Verdi admired greatly and often used as a touchstone in composing his own works. And just to prove the point, here are score excerpts from this scene:

STRETTA DEL FINALE I.

„Chi ti salva, o sciagurato,”

Fr. 5. -

N. 12.

ATTO I. Seguito della SCENA XI.

LINA. (rompe il fermaglio del libro, e cade una lettera) (Ciel!)
 STIFFELIO. Nol vo - le - te?.. Fa - rol - lo io stes - so... U - na let - tera! (a Stiffelio)
 STANKAR. Fer -
 ALLEGRO.
 raccogliendo la lettera)
 - ma - tel Non v'è legger tal fo - glio con - ces - so... Chi lo scrisse, cui spetti gno -
 STIF. esaltato
 Io nol cu - ro... ren - de - te - lo... il vo?... Rende - te - lo...
 - ra - te... Vec - chio so - no...
 (irato a Stankar)
 Rende - te - lo. Rende - te - lo. (lo riduce in brani) Ah! Chi ti sal - va, scia - gu -
 No. No. No, no, no, no, no,.....
 PRESTO.

ra - to, dal - lo sde - gno che m'ac - cen - de? Cie - co l'i - ra

(a Stiffelio frapponendosi)
LINA
E mio

sa - dre... l'i - ra vo - stra su me tut - ta ca - da al - fi - ne;

ma le ne - vi di quel cri - ne ri - spet - ta - te - le, si - gno - re, ma le ne - vi di quel

STIF.
Cie - co l'i - ra già mi ren - de, più non fre - no il mio fu - ro - re, cie - co l'i - ra già mi

The second act begins with an excellent, pensive aria by Lina, wandering in the cemetery and seeking comfort at her mother's grave; the introductory music, played by celli and the violas, is moody and restless; the music is more varied and interesting than Amelia's aria "Ecco l'orrido campo" in *Un ballo in Maschera*, but the somber mood is broken by Lina's silly and superfluous cabaletta. When Raffaele arrives, she asks him to give back her ring, which he refuses to do. Here, Stankar arrives with two swords; handing one to Raffaele, he challenges him to a duel, secretly hoping he will be killed defending his daughter's honor. Raffaele initially refuses because Stankar is an old man, but eventually starts dueling him. Stiffelio arrives and tries to force them to make peace, but when he clasps Raffaele's hand, this angers Stankar to the point that he tells Stiffelio the truth: this is his wife's seducer. Although this is fast-paced music, it suits the words and the dramatic mood excellently, using counterpoint and other devices to pit Lina's voice against the other three. In a fit of rage, Stiffelio picks up the sword and starts to attack Raffaele, but the sound of voices singing inside the church, awaiting words of comfort from their minister, stop him in his tracks.

At the outset of Act III, Stankar is holding a letter from Raffaele to Lina asking her to join him in flight. Unable to live with this, Stankar decides to shoot himself, but Jorg tells him that Raffaele has been caught and will soon be brought before Stiffelio for judgment. Surprisingly,

however, Stiffelio places Raffaele in an adjoining room where he can overhear his conversation with Lina. He tells her that he will grant her a divorce if that is what she really wants, reminding her that their marriage certificate is not legally binding because he married her under his assumed name when he was hiding out from his enemies. Much to his surprise, Lina begins to cry and reveals that Raffaele had taken her by force against her will, but then threatened to blackmail her if she refused to continue seeing him; her love for Stiffelio has not changed. Enraged, Stiffelio cries out for Raffaele's death. Stankar suddenly emerges from the other room, his sword dripping with blood; having overheard everything, he realized that his daughter was a victim and not a willing accomplice in adultery, thus he killed Raffaele rather than himself.

The final scene of the third act is yet another great moment for Verdi as Jorg advises Stiffelio to find comfort in the Bible. The latter faces his congregation, opens the Bible and reads the passage in which Jesus forgives an adulterous woman, thus granting Lina her pardon before all of his flock. Here the music is solemn, beginning with an organ playing hymn-like music as the congregation begins singing "Do not punish me, Lord, in your anger," with Stankar begging God's forgiveness for avenging his daughter's honor and Lina, singing almost continually soft, leaping octaves to the words "I place my trust in you, o Lord, have mercy." This foreshadows the "La vergine degl'angeli" scene from *La forza del Destino* but is shorter and, in a sense, more dramatically effective. The tempo doubles when Jorg and Stiffelio enter, but not to the point of sounding silly. Stiffelio intones the Biblical passage over soft bass pizzicato and high, sustained organ notes. The opera thus ends in dignity, as well it should.

Unfortunately, several critics reviewing this opera from its revised edition described it as mostly garbage except for one or two scenes. They missed the forest for the trees. Considering where Verdi was, musically and dramatically, in 1850, *Stiffelio* is a masterpiece. Some of the complaints stemmed from the claim made that the role of Stiffelio was a precursor of Otello. Insofar as the voice type it is written for, that is true. For the first time, Verdi wrote not for a high tenor who could sing trills, runs and high Cs, some in head voice and some from the chest, but for a heavy lyric tenor bordering on the dramatic—probably to differentiate him from Raffaele who, though a secondary character, is really a very important one which must be sung by a good vocalist.

Perhaps this is a reach, but I couldn't escape the feeling that some of the best music in *Stiffelio* may be some of the rejected *Re Lear* music, such as that first-act aria that turns into a duo and then a trio. There's just something very sophisticated about much (but not all) of the score that convinces me that this may be so. In any case, *Stiffelio* is clearly an unjustly neglected and underrated opera that deserves greater exposure.

Although the preferred modern recording of it features a cast of excellent singers—Roberto Aronica as Stiffelio, Guanquin Yu as Lina, Roberto Frontali as Stankar and Gabriele Magnioni as Raffaele—it is conducted much too fast and quite glibly by young Andrea Battistoni, who seems to confuse this music for that of *Ballo in Maschera*. Even the more dignified moments in the score are rushed through, and this unbalances and cheapens the dramatic quality of the music. Therefore I recommend the 1978 recording with José Carreras (Stiffelio), Sylvia Sass (who brings an almost overwhelming sympathy and poignancy to Lina), Matteo Managuerra as Stankar and the excellent tenor Ezio di Cesare as the villain Raffaele, conducted beautifully by the late Lamberto Gardelli, although the Battistoni performance, which is also available on DVD, is worth seeing because it is a beautiful, traditional production in which the characters look like what they are supposed to be, early 19th-century Protestants, not Nazis or modern-day guys wearing backward baseball caps and hip-hop fashion. But you need to hear this opera by any means possible in order to appreciate what an excellent work this really is.

Verdi: *Rigoletto* (1851)

Of the three most famous of Verdi's early-middle-period operas, *La Traviata* is the weakest in terms of true dramatic moments (but clearly not in entertaining tunes) and *Il Trovatore* the weakest in terms of structural integrity (although I've long felt that the Count di Luna is vastly underrated as a dramatic character...in my view, he's just as psychotic as Azucena, which is why they represent a sort of Yin-Yang within the opera's plot), but *Rigoletto*, despite four exceptionally weak moments, was clearly a step forward. I firmly believe that in many ways, *Rigoletto* is underestimated not only by musical scholars but also by audiences simply because it is so incredibly popular, and in this case familiarity doesn't breed contempt but, rather, complacency.

In addition, it was during this exact period, or shortly thereafter, that Verdi began to get really irritated by the number of singers who continually added high notes to his music that weren't written. As we have seen, he was a somewhat dour, testy person by nature anyway, in addition to constantly having to compromise his musical principles in order to please a public that wanted Tunes and High Notes, but he felt that he had written enough of them into the scores that singers didn't have to constantly add unwritten ones in order to generate louder applause. Eventually he was to tell his publisher, Ricordi, to print a caveat in his scores that anyone found violating the score would forfeit the right to perform his music. From a practical standpoint, however, this was virtually impossible to enforce, since this was well before the days of mass media and unless a reviewer mentioned a certain high note that didn't belong, neither he nor Ricordi would even know about it, but Verdi became well aware that tenors were singing a long-held high C at the end of "Di quella pira" and an unwritten high B at the end of "La donna è mobile," that both tenors and sopranos were tossing high notes galore into *Traviata*, all of which he hated because in his view they spoiled the overall effect of what he had written. Since his demands went nowhere, however, we shall let it drop here except to point out where the scores conflict with what one normally hears in performance.

Interestingly, Victor Hugo's play *Le Roi s'Amuse*, on which *Rigoletto* is based, was not Verdi's first choice for an opera at this time, but rather Alexandre Dumas Sr.'s play *Kean*, based on the life of the great Shakespearean actor Edmund Kean. Although certain French (Berlioz) and German composers had "discovered" Shakespeare as a rich source of material by 1851, Verdi was virtually alone among his fellows in his admiration for the English Bard. I think it would have been fascinating to hear what he could have done with *Kean*, particularly by this time when he was approaching the height of his powers (but not quite there yet), but once he lit on *Le Roi s'Amuse* his mind was made up. He found the subject matter "grand, immense, and there is a character that is one of the greatest creations that the theatre can boast of."³

But *Le Roi s'Amuse* ran into trouble with the censors because the licentious, cynical member of royalty in the opera was King Francis I of France. And this time, not even Piave complained; the play itself had been banned in France immediately after its first performance (it wasn't staged again until 1882!). Verdi begged Piave to run through Venice (where the premiere was to take place) and find him an influential person who could pass the play for an opera libretto. Guglielmo Brenna, the secretary of La Fenice, promised Verdi and Piave that they would not have a problem staging it, but he was wrong. Eventually, the duo had to incorporate features of another opera (composer not identified), *Il Duca di Vendome*, in which the nobleman was a Duke and not a King, but in this plot both the hunchback and the curse were not present. Verdi railed against this; he would rather negotiate with the censors on each and every item in the libretto rather than water it down this much. Eventually, it was decided that the main character would indeed be a Duke; the story was moved to Mantua, where he was a member of the Gonzaga family.

³ Verdi to Piave, April 28, 1850, in Phillips-Matz: *Verdi: A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 265.

Since the Gonzagas no longer existed and there were no longer Dukes of Mantua, this was acceptable.

But on to the music. The orchestral prelude to *Rigoletto*, vastly underrated, is one of Verdi's finest creations. The musical theme or motif of the curse is heard and the music builds up to an almost unbearable dramatic climax, with brass, strings and cymbals crashing around the listener's ears. Following such a terrifying opening, one of course expects a dark, menacing first scene, but in *Rigoletto* Verdi chose to borrow again from his musical idol, Mozart, in this case the *chiaroscuro* principle, playing light, playful, almost vapid moments against dark, dramatic and, in this opera, cynical ones. The reason, of course, was to continually point up the shallow and hedonistic personality of the Duke, which completely permeated his court and all of its members. Rigoletto, his hunchbacked court jester, is lucky to have any job at all, let alone one that pays as well as this, so of course when he's at court he oozes all over the Duke, reaffirming his right to violate any woman present regardless of the consequences. The problem is that one of the Duke's conquests is the Countess Monterone. Her husband bursts onto the scene, righteously furious, and assails the Duke. Unfortunately, Rigoletto mocks the Count and supports the Duke in this situation, which causes Monterone to put a curse on him before he is dragged away to prison. Being superstitious, Rigoletto is fearful of and haunted by this curse throughout the remainder of the opera.

Verdi worked harder on *Rigoletto* than on any other opera he had written up to this point; even while Piave (who was also the stage director) was creating the sets, Verdi was still working and reworking on Act III, particularly the finale. As late as February 7, 1852, only a month before the premiere, Verdi would still not release a third of the score. It wasn't until February 17 that the singers were able to see and rehearse the full score, yet even during this period Verdi continued to work on and refine the orchestration.

In my view, the weakest part of the opera is the character of Gilda. True, she is a very naïve 16- or 17-year-old who has been kept at home and sheltered by her father; the Duke, under the guise of a poor university student, has seduced and violated her; but once she learns the truth, why oh why does she sacrifice herself for him? This is completely out of character for a Verdi "heroine." Even Violetta, a courtesan, has more backbone than Gilda. After thinking about this problem for several years, I've come to the conclusion that *because* she is seduced by a man who has no character, she feels she is worthless, that no righteous man will now want her, and therefore her life is forfeit; but it still strikes me as a contrived plot device that would not stand up dramatically in today's world. And, if this is indeed the case, why does she sing in her dying breath of going to meet her mother in heaven? Does she think that sacrificing her life for the Duke's somehow exonerates her "sin" of being violated? These are not irrelevant questions, because in my view they are important to answer if we are to take *Rigoletto* seriously as drama.

In most respects, however, Verdi achieved his goals. Except for four weak moments, he created a masterpiece. In Act I Scene 1, for instance, he masterfully turns around Monterone's quick in-ad-out appearance by suddenly turning the dark music that accompanies him into a rollicking, jolly finale with the Duke singing his tune in an opposing rhythm to the rest of his court. Scene 2 is entirely dramatic as Rigoletto, walking home through a dark alley and worrying about the curse, is met by the street thug Sparafucile who offers his services to him as an assassin of any enemy of his. But here is clearly a strange moment: is Sparafucile in the habit of accosting everyone who walks that alley and offering them his services? And if so, why hadn't he done it on another, previous night? This may not be a serious dramatic weakness, but it does raise questions.

Rigoletto's aria, "Pari siamo," is the most brilliant thing Verdi had written up to this time: more of a dramatic monologue with shifting tempos, rhythms and moods, it combines the aria

form with the semi-parlando recitative of yore in an entirely new way. Interestingly, at the end of this aria is the first instance of how singers distorted what Verdi wrote. On the words “Ah, follia!” Rigoletto is only supposed to go up one full tone on the next-to-last syllable, but nearly all baritones, even today, raise it a bit higher and hold the note to please the crowds. And then, unfortunately, all of this dramatic set-up comes crashing down in his jolly, tuneful duet with Gilda. There is one pretty good moment where the music is interrupted because Rigoletto thinks he sees someone hiding in the shadows, but when they resume they are chirping their happy little tune, now in counterpoint to one another. Then, after Rigoletto leaves, Giovanna enters and then the Duke, and the latter and Gilda sing yet another dorky little tune, “E il sol dell’anima,” followed by the “Addio, addio” section. Gilda’s aria, “Gualtier Malde...Caro nome” is neither here nor there. Although it does capture, to a point, the feelings of a young woman in love (there are written rests between the descending notes of the “Caro nome” melody, to express Gilda’s breathless feeling, which are not always observed), but it goes on too long and ends in a drown-out trill. The scene in which Gilda is abducted by the Duke’s courtiers, however, is pretty good.

Act III opens with the weakest and most superfluous moment in the entire opera, the Duke’s monologue “Ella mi fu rapita...Parmi veder le lagrime.” It is weak and superfluous because it is entirely out of character for this cynical, hedonistic character. What does *he* care if she now rejects him? He has plenty of fish to fry; she means nothing to him other than a quick wham-bam-thank-you-ma’m. And he follows this silly aria up with an even sillier cabaletta, “Possenti amor mi chiamo,” into which many tenors interpolate a high note at the end that’s not in the score.

Rigoletto’s entrance in this act, in which he apparently tries to sing a jolly “La-ra-la-ra” but ends up sounding morose, is more melodramatic than truly dramatic music, but the ensuing “Cortigianni! Vil razza dannata!” is the second-best aria in the entire opera, an aria that also morphs and changes as it progresses though not quite on the high level of “Pari siamo.” Then a tearful Gilda enters, consoled by her father, and we get another tune fest: “Tutte le festa” followed by “Piangi, piangi fanciulla.” Considering the context, the concluding “Si, vendetta, tremenda vendetta” is pretty good.

The third and last act was the one that cost Verdi the most time and effort, and although he threw in a bone to make the crowds happy (“La donna è mobile”) it’s fairly well-written and mostly continuous from the opening of the famous quartet (which is also supposed to end with the soprano and tenor going down, not up to high notes) through to the end. Verdi mustered all of his powers to create a continuously tense atmosphere in the remaining music; even the softer passages have a strange feeling of menace about them, and his exploding thunderstorm, presaged by a wordless offstage chorus (a brilliant stroke), is masterful. His discovery of Gilda in the sack that he thinks contains the Duke’s body is also quite good, as is the sudden reprise of “La donna è mobile” (this time *with* the high B written at the end), but sadly, “Lassù in cielo” was a cop-out, another concession to public taste and not really dramatic. Rigoletto’s final “Maledizione!” over the crashing sounds of the orchestra is an effective ending, but it’s like putting a musically dramatic moment after someone sings “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

So there you have it. Roughly a quarter of the music here is skillfully written but dramatically weak, yet on balance—if the singers really get into their roles—it can be a very moving experience.

The only recording of the opera that is both dramatic and correctly sung is the one with Luca Selsi (Rigoletto), Javier Camarena (the Duke), Enkeleda Kamani (Gilda), basso Alessio Cacciamani (Sparafucile) and Caterina Piva (Maddelena), conducted by Riccardo Frizza, despite Selsi’s intermittent unsteadiness of voice. If you insist on an old-school version with all the extraneous high notes, however, I also recommend the December 1945 Metropolitan Opera

broadcast with Leonard Warren (Rigoletto), Jussi Björling (Duke), Bidú Sayão (Gilda), Norman Cordon (Sparafucile) and Martha Lipton (Maddelena). Despite the uneven conducting of one Cesare Soderò, who fluctuates the tempi as if he were stretching taffy, each of these singers fully inhabits their characters (the usually cool Björling sounds perfect for the callous Duke) and Warren's "Cortigianni" is almost a model of lieder singing.

Verdi: *Simon Boccanegra* (1857 version)

Because the revised version of this opera from 1881 is the one nearly everyone performs because it is far superior to this 1857 original, I believe that the first version is worth exploring as a study not only in contrast with what was eventually finalized but to show how the state of Verdi's development in the 1850s, when he was in his 40s, came much slower to him than did Wagner's, and it wasn't always because he felt that he had to pander to popular tastes. He really just didn't know yet how to create a *consistently* dramatic work because it wasn't yet within his skill set to do so.

As we know, the plot of this opera is extremely complex and, more to the point, psychological. Verdi and Piave were able to condense and transform Antonio Garcia Gutiérrez' play *El trovador* into a theatrically effective opera, but we know how complex the plot was and how neither librettist nor composer really straightened it out; they just let glorious, melodic music carry the day; but what worked for *El trovador* simply could not work for *Simon Boccanegra*. Claire Janice Detels, a psychologist deeply involved with the arts (her 1999 book *Soft Boundaries* argue for a full integration of music, visual arts, theater and dance into the mainstream curriculum), wrote her doctoral dissertation on the revision of this opera. On page three of her dissertation she wrote:

...this plot consisted of a series of political intrigues far too subtle and complex for the medium of Italian opera, and particularly for Verdi's intensely human style of drama. In accordance with the Italian operatic tradition of brevità (brevity), which limited explanations of the plot in recitative sections to the barest minimum, Verdi and his original librettist Francesco Maria Piave cut out much of the political scheming and concentrated instead on the personal conflicts between the main characters, particularly the two young lovers Gabriele Adorno and Amelia Grimaldi, whose romance had been no more than peripheral in the Garcia Gutiérrez play. Unfortunately, this shift in emphasis created serious confusion in the plot of the 1857 Boccanegra which was only partially alleviated in the 1881 revision.⁴

A similar situation for Verdi not only created problems for *Il Trovatore* but also for *Un ballo in Maschera* (1859, see below). Much of the story line is heavily streamlined, and although it is far less confusing to follow than *Trovatore* it ends up being more of a Reader's Digest condensation of the plot, which makes it far less effective dramatically despite some of the most glorious music Verdi ever penned.

Even from the beginning, we get the impression that Verdi is in over his head; the prelude starts out as just a series of staccato orchestral chords, which then die off; when the music resumes, it is in a much faster tempo and has a bit of drama in it, but it's all surfacy, not nearly as interesting as the preludes to *Rigoletto* or even *Trovatore*. This version of the opera does not have a Prologue, but goes immediately into Act I. Paolo and Pietro enter and discuss how they will vote for Doge. Paolo favors Simon Boccanegra, a pirate turned half-respectable; the other half had an affair, and a daughter, by a respectable woman whose father, Fiesco, has locked her

⁴ Detels, Claire Janice: *Giuseppe Verdi's Simon Boccanegra: A Comparison of the 1857 and 1881 Versions*. University of Washington, 1982.

away in a dungeon. Eventually this leads to Fiesco's prayer and farewell to his (presumed) dead daughter, which of course was left intact in the revised version.

In the Simon-Fiesco duet, the former laments that since his baby Maria has disappeared and cannot be returned to her grandfather there cannot be peace between them. In the finale to the act, Verdi used some strikingly low-key music as Simon celebrates his victory as Doge but laments that his lover Maria (not the daughter of the same name) is now dead. Suddenly we hear peppy music for the chorus as they celebrate Simon's victory.

Act II opens with a much less sophisticated orchestral introduction to Amelia's/Maria's aria, "Come in quest'ora bruna," the melody of which is the same but the tempo of which is much faster (and, to my ears, less effective because of this—it just sounds rushed). This version ends with a cadenza and a trill...operatic convention of 1857, and neither one sounds right in context. The lyrics are also different; here, she sings that she and almost everyone else thinks she is Amelia but she knows she is Maria, which is just plain wrong. Shortly after she hears her lover Gabriele from offstage, she goes into a pretty bad (and unnecessary) cadenza, ending with a coloratura run and a trill. The Maria-Gabriele duet is also musically different, but in this case, really not bad—in fact, I think I prefer this music to the revised version. Although they discuss politics. A bit of the revised duet music is then heard, which means that Verdi decided to carry this part of it over. But this duet, too, suddenly goes into a rapid duo-cabaletta for the pair; they sound as if they're about to run off and join the circus. (Who knows? Maybe they are!) And of course, this ends with a yippie-i-o-ki-yay orchestral finale.

Fiesco enters the scene, masquerading as Andrea, and tells Gabriele that Amelia is not who everyone thinks she is, but a foundling whom he raised to protect his property, mostly against Simon. Then comes an offstage trumpet fanfare followed by a Simon-Paolo duet in which the latter discusses the possibility of his marrying Amalia. This is followed by the father-daughter recognition duet, nearly 10 minutes long but actually pretty good music that could have been carried over to the revision (some of it was, but not most of it).

The next scene is also entirely different from the revision: a series of bouncy choral numbers, ending with African corsairs. Great for the tune-loving members of the audience, but in an opera this serious they stick out like a sore thumb. Gabriele bursts onto the scene, accusing Simon of kidnapping Amalia, but by golly she shows up on her own and so all is well for the moment. The ensuing quartet, however, is surprisingly good music, apt to the dramatic moment—a rare oasis of quality in what is essentially a tune fest.

I could continue but see no reason to do so. I'm sure the reader gets the point. This is "Boccanegra Lite," a frothy, fizzy sweet drink for those who thirst for peppy tunes and nothing very deep. But it *was* worth exploring if for no other reason than to illustrate that the Giuseppe Verdi of the 1850s was lucky to have turned out at least two mostly great dramatic works. The others of this period may be quite entertaining, and even have some isolated moments of drama, but *Stiffelio* and *Rigoletto* were really as good as the Verdi of that time frame could produce.

Verdi: *La Forza del Destino* (1862)

By 1862, Verdi's fame had long since spread to Russia, where his *La Traviata* in particular was a popular favorite. As a result, he was commissioned by the Bolshoi Kamenny Theatre in St. Petersburg to write an opera for them. The result was *La forza del Destino*, and in this work, finally, Verdi took a major step forward in refining his art.

Although the story, yet another one based on hot-headed Spaniards, was typical fare for the Italian composer, Verdi and his librettist (Piave again) took great care in the programming and pacing of scenes as well as the orchestration and vocal lines. This time, even his closed-form arias and duets matched the dramatic action perfectly; the music of Don Alvaro's "O tu che in

seno agl'angeli," Leonora's "Madre, pietosa vergine" or Don Carlo's "Urna fatale" could not have been about almost anything. The music matched the words in feeling, dramatic pacing and even the syllabic construction of the text. Verdi had finally come close to equaling the work of his idol Mozart.

The opening scene is a perfect example. Following the bustling, excitable overture, the music is slow, dark and calm, setting the stage for Alvaro's nocturnal meeting with his sweetheart, Leonora, in her bedroom. Suddenly her father, the Marchese di Calatrava, bursts on the scene. Alvaro explains what is going on, that he is deeply in love with Leonora, and means no harm to the old man. In a gesture of surrender, he tosses his gun to the floor...but when it hits, the hammer goes off and accidentally shoots the old man. This is the basis for the remainder of the drama. Knowing full well that her hot-headed brother, Don Carlo, would never believe the truth, Leonora runs off to parts unknown and Don Alvaro is also unfortunately forced to flee.

Using the same repeated pattern of three brass chords that opened the overture, Verdi suddenly switches moods, using this music to introduce the gypsy Preziosilla who is entertaining soldiers in an outdoor venue. The only problem with Preziosilla's music is that it's not really that amusing or attractive; she eventually sings a "Rataplan" that is sadly inferior to the one Donizetti wrote for his comic opera *La fille du Regiment*.

The remainder of the opera is best termed as "scenes from a life." We see Leonora approach a Franciscan monastery and ask permission to enter as a novice in the order. Padre Guardiano, serene and patient, comes to understand that she is fleeing a difficult situation in her life and agrees. When we next see Alvaro, he is in a regiment of soldiers, using the pseudonym Don Federico Herreras, off to fight in a battle. His closest friend and ally, unbeknownst to him, is Don Carlo, Leonora's brother, who he had never seen before, using the pseudonym Don Felix Bornos. Returning wounded from the battlefield, Alvaro, who thinks he may be dying, gives Carlo a locket for safe keeping as they sing the haunting duet, "Solenne in quest'ora." After Alvaro is taken off on a stretcher, Carlo sings "Morir! tremenda cosa!" ("To die! A tremendous thing!") but he breaks his promise to wait until he knows that Alvaro is dead and opens the locket—where he sees a photograph of his sister Leonora. Now knowing who his ally is, he sings a vengeance aria.

Eventually we see Leonora as a novice, singing the turbulent "Madre, pietosa vergine." As Guardiano comes over and calms her down, they combine to sing the haunting "La vergine degl'angeli" with the chorus. There is another Preziosilla scene but, even better, a very funny scene at the monastery where another monk, Fra Melitone, becomes exasperated with poor people begging for food who are crowding him. All of this gives the opera a "slice of life" feel to it that is highly unusual in Verdi operas, then or later.

Of course Alvaro and Carlo meet again, this time with the latter accusing the former of murdering his father. Alvaro tries to explain, but Carlo's temper flares in the excitable duet "Sleale! Il segreto!" This music, unfortunately, is more formulaic though theatrically effective.

And wouldn't you know it, Alvaro goes and joins the same monastery where Leonora is—but since, as a woman, she is separated from all the others and lives in a cave, he doesn't know it. He has adopted the name Father Raphael. Don Carlo somehow finds him there and challenges him to a duel, although Alvaro demurs until Carlo calls him a half-breed. Some of the music of this duet ("Alvaro, Alvaro...Le minaccie") is quite good while other parts of it are somewhat formulaic, but with its primary minor-key setting it suits both the mood and the words pretty well. At the point where Alvaro explodes in anger, the music suddenly increases in tempo, sharpens in pitch and becomes much louder, a fine moment. Would that Verdi had come up with something half as good for his first version of *Simon Boccanegra*.

The pair rush off to duel with swords, offstage. Alvaro rushes off to the unknown hermit's cave to ask for extreme unction to be given the dying man; as soon as she emerges, Leonora and Alvaro recognize each other. When he tells her what happened, she rushes to the dying man; he recognizes his sister and stabs her in the chest. Padre Guardiano, who has come out to see what all the commotion is about, tells Alvaro to stop cursing and humble himself before God.

Now this is where Verdi's first thought was undoubtedly his best. Overcome by guilt at having killed or caused the deaths of all the Calatravas, Alvaro leaps to his death in a nearby ravine, cursing mankind. The music, even darker than at any time throughout the opera, accompanies this final cruel blow of fate as the curtain falls.

It was an excellent and wholly dramatic ending to the opera, but to my knowledge the only time it has been performed this way was in a 1995 Bolshoi performance conducted by Valery Gergiev, a performance issued on both DVD and CD. Returning with the opera to Italy, Verdi discovered that audiences were turned off by such gritty realism; they wanted a "beautiful" ending. Thus he completely re-wrote the scene as a "heavenly" trio in 3/4 time with Leonora, Alvaro and Guardiano, now in a major rather than a minor key and ending with soft, gossamer strings ascending to the rafters after Leonora dies. It's very pretty; it brings tears to the eyes; but it's scarcely as stark as Verdi's original ending, which is musical drama at its very best.

The only real problem with *Forza* is that, because of its somewhat sprawling structure, it is a difficult opera to pull together into a cohesive whole. The best sung performance of it, albeit in mono sound, is the performance with Pier Mirando-Ferraro (Don Alvaro), Anita Cerquetti (Leonora), Aldo Protti (Don Carlo), Giulietta Simionato (the best Preziosilla ever), Boris Christoff (Padre Guardiano) and conductor Nino Sanzogno, but the one that holds together the best in structure, despite an overloud Alvaro who all but ruins "Solenne in quest'ora," is the performance with Franco Bonisolli (Alvaro), Gilda Cruz-Romo (Leonora), Kostas Paskalis (Carlo), Cesare Siepi (Padre Guardiano) and conductor Riccardo Muti with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

***Serov: Judith* (1862-63)**

Until the early 1860s, Russian operas were based on Italian or French models, even the operas of Mikhail Glinka which used stories by Alexander Pushkin as their basis. This is one reason why Verdi was asked to write *Forza* for St. Petersburg. But as fate would have it, at about the same time that *Forza* was premiered, a Russian composer named Alexander Serov (1820-1871) was putting the finishing touches on the first authentically Russian opera score.

Serov, who was born into a wealthy family—his father was a Finance Ministry officer and his grandfather an inspector in Moscow University's printing department and a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences—and sent to school to become an attorney, which he was for a decade, but at age 30 he quit his job to pursue a music career. He composed music, wrote musical reviews and gave lectures on music, though none of these provided well for him financially. Because of his desire to use more authentic Russian themes in his operas and his admiration for Wagner, he was also on the outside looking in with his older colleagues, all of whom preferred the breezy, melodic styles of Glinka and César Cui. Serov died, unexpectedly, of a heart attack at the age of 51.

Serov's operas occupy an unusual position in both Russian and operatic art, sounding halfway between the breezy Western style of Glinka and the grittier, darker and clearly more advanced style of his younger colleague Modest Mussorgsky, but a proper judgment of his last two operas (he wrote only three), *Rogneda* and *The Power of the Fiend*, is virtually impossible since only fragments have been recorded of either. As for the work that was considered his masterpiece, *Judith*, we fortunately have a complete recording, but only one. To the best of my know-

ledge, his works aren't even performed in modern Russia, nor were they performed during the period of the Soviet Union (although the brief excerpts from *Rogneda* were recorded in 1945), possibly because his father and grandfather were bureaucrats beholden to the Czar, but they were performed, at least sporadically, in pre-Soviet Russia. We know this because there is a photograph of the great bass Feodor Chaliapin as Holofernes in *Judith* and a recording by him of a short excerpt from *The Power of the Fiend*. As I hope to illustrate, this is an egregious omission in the history of opera. Serov was clearly a talented and often inspired composer whose music filled an important gap between Cui and Mussorgsky.⁵

Judith was, of course, based on the Biblical story of the brave Jewess who helped to defend the Palestinians by cutting off the head of the leader of the invading army, Holofernes, although Serov was initially inspired by a performance of Paolo Giacometti's play, *Giuditta*, in St. Petersburg in 1860. According to Wikipedia,⁶ Ivan Antonovich wrote a libretto in Italian using Serov's scenario for a potential Italian production, but for some reason this proved to be legally impossible, thus it was translated into Russian by Kostantin Zvantov and Dmitry Lobonov, with some words added by poet Apollon Maykov. In the meantime, however, Serov was writing the music without having the text in front of him.

Although *Judith* sounds like an opera halfway between Glinka and Mussorgsky, halfway is better than not at all, and in my opinion there is no question that *Judith* influenced *Boris Godunov*. *Judith* is in many respects powerful and moving music, but the one thing it lacks which many operagoers insist on are set arias and duets set to melodic lines and including lots of high notes. As I said, it is much more of a real Russian opera than Glinka or Rimsky-Korsakov, thus the drama is always brought to the fore. There are moments of Western-styled music in it, but not as much as Western audiences would like, thus it isn't performed. There are also no less than five(!) bass roles in the opera, which makes sense since Russian basses, then and now, are often the pride of that country's singers, but this, too, makes the opera sound gloomier than other Biblical operas such as Rossini's *Moïse in Egitto* or Verdi's *Nabucco*.

There's a lively chorus set to contrapuntal music in the first act that leans more towards Western music, but in several instances the chorus fulfills the same role as that in *Boris Godunov* (or also in *Nabucco*) as the voice of the people and an extra protagonist in the sung drama. The first act is dominated by three of the basses (the elders Ozias and Charmi and the high priest Eliachim), thus Serov writes the accompanying orchestration in a fairly deep range to complement them. Even when one of the tenors (Achior) appears, the music is grounded in the basses and celli, with only occasional high winds (but not high strings) to relieve the sound. This, too, reminds one of *Boris*. Achior's long solo in the first act is melodic but not like an aria in the conventional sense of the word, though it is more melodic than plain sung recitative... much like Grigory, the false Dmitri, in *Boris*. One nice touch is that Serov creates a nicely melodic bass duet in 3/4 time with chorus in this act.

Judith opens the second act with a solo scene—again, melodic but not an aria proper, since it is not a continuous line of music but one with interruptions. It is designed to carry the narrative and not to be a “show stopper.” In the second part of this scene, again set to 3/4 time, there are some interesting similarities to Senta's music from *Der fliegende Holländer*. There's an interesting duet—again, dramatic but not conventionally tuneful in the Western sense—between *Judith* and her slave Avra. (That's a good one, huh? A “captive” Jewess who owns her own personal slave!) Avra then gets an aria, and a proper one, albeit a very Russian-sounding one, and surprisingly this aria ends as a duet as the music suddenly shifts to the minor and back again. After

⁵ Musicologist Richard Taruskin, in a famous article, attributed much of the anti-Serov smear to his rival, V. Stasov.

⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_\(Serov\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_(Serov))

another brief scene, Judith sings melodic lines that sound stolen out of *Boris*, except that *Boris* hadn't been written yet.

Judith has what sounds like a proper aria with chorus at the beginning of Act III, but again this turns into a duet when the mezzo enters. Unfortunately, we then get some simple ballet music, which had been *de rigueur* in operas of the time thanks to the French "grand opera" style that took Russia by storm. The scene in Act IV where Judith eventually kills and beheads Holofernes is one of the most dramatic in the entire opera, however, and the fifth and last act moves much better, including some impressive choral scenes as well as Judith announcing that she has the severed head of Holofernes.

My guess is that the opera, which was extremely popular for a few years after its premiere, eventually fell from grace because the rather slim story line is dragged out over five acts, and although much of the music is quite good it didn't hold one's interest, even in the opera house, when compared to the rapidly shifting scenarios in *Boris Godunov* or *Khovanshchina*. Yet as I say, at least half of the music is quite dramatic and it is surely better than a lot of mid-19th-century garbage that still persists in the standard repertoire.

In regards to a recorded performance, we are at the mercy of the only one made, in 1991 with Irina Udalova (Judith), Elena Zarembo (Avra), Anatoly Babykin (Ozias), Maxim Mikhailov (Charmi), Pyotr Glubokiy (Eliachim), Vladimir Kudriashov (Achior) and Mikhail Krutikov (Holofernes). Our conductor, Andrey Christakov, starts out like a house on fire but for some reason runs out of steam as the opera unfolds—yet it's all we have.

Berlioz: *Les Troyens* (1863, just "Trojans at Carthage"; 1890 both parts with cuts; 1947 complete)

And here we finally arrive at the one undisputed operatic masterpiece of this era that was *not* written by Richard Wagner. But when I say "undisputed," I am referring to the opinions of musicians, musical scholars and musically educated listeners. Many average opera fans still don't "get" *Troyens* and never will because Berlioz continually undercut their expectations of memorable tunes and climactic high notes at the ends of arias...or of arias, period. In his outstanding two-volume biography of the composer,⁷ David Cairns states that the reason Berlioz' operas were underappreciated was because they were based on the model of Gluck, which had become obsolete by the time Berlioz reached his musical maturity, but there is more to it than that. Making side-by-side comparisons of Gluck's operas to Berlioz', one does hear the lack of reliance on tuneful airs and both composers' proclivity for emphasizing astringent wind sounds in the orchestra (flutes, clarinets and oboes) to create a "biting" sound, but even so, Gluck's sense of musical construction was still linear and based on regular metric forms. Berlioz was often non-linear; his music was based on a vertical reading of the score in which every aspect, from the solo voice(s) to the chorus (if included) and particularly the orchestra, moved from note to note with the whole apparatus in motion. He was also fond, as Gluck was not, of quirky or unusual rhythmic figures, based in part on some of the more unusual movements in Beethoven's symphonies: the first movement of the Seventh, or the scherzos of the Fifth and Ninth. But whereas Beethoven only used this occasionally, Berlioz used it all the time. And if all that weren't enough, Berlioz frequently used open fourths, fifths and sixths in his harmonies, which gave his music a much starker sound than that of Gluck. This was something that even well-educated musicians had trouble coming to grips with. Even in the early 20th century, Maurice Ravel dismissed Berlioz as a composer because "he didn't even know how to harmonize a C chord proper-

⁷ Cairns, David: *Vol. 1: The Making of an Artist, 1803-1832* (1989) & *Vol. 2: Servitude and Greatness, 1833-1869* (2000), University of California Press.

ly”—but of course he did know, as was proven in some of his other works. He just chose not to, and this baffled many listeners. Even after Sir Thomas Beecham gave the first nearly complete performance of *Les Troyens* in the 20th century in 1947, and Rafael Kubelik staged it at Covent Garden with Jon Vickers as Énée in 1957, listeners were baffled. Even I was baffled when I first heard Colin Davis’ 1969 studio recording in the early 1970s. The music didn’t “move” in a regular manner; it jumped and lurched about in the fast passages, and in the lyrical ones it never coalesced around a melody that had mass appeal as in Verdi or Gounod. I was *impressed* by it but not *enamored* of it, and although familiarity with the score has now made me love it, I suspect that even with familiarity, many listeners are still in the “it’s pretty good but not for me” stage.

Berlioz had always been an avid fan of the writings of Virgil, thus when his friend Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein prodded him to write an opera based on them, Berlioz was inspired but doubtful that he could put that much hard work into it. The Princess gave him an ultimatum: “If you’re so weak as to be afraid of the work and will not face everything for the sake of Dido and Cassandra, then never come back here, for I do not want to see you ever again.”⁸ Berlioz spent two years, 1856-58, writing *Troyens*, and even so faltered in his resolve a few times. His colleague, the great mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot-Garcia for whom he was writing the role of Didon, kept picking up his spirits and urging him to completion, but by the time it was first staged in 1863, Viardot-Garcia’s voice had deteriorated to the point where Berlioz was actually afraid to use her because he felt she could no longer project both the strength and the pathos of the character. Instead, he used the incredibly beautiful mezzo Anne-Arsène Charlton-Demeur, who apparently gave a first-class performance.

And clearly, all of Berlioz’ quiriness is audible in the opening orchestral-choral prelude to the first part, *The Capture of Troy* (Acts I & II), which were unfortunately left out of the opera’s premiere in 1863: the stiff rhythms, biting flutes and clarinets, open harmonies and that quirky stilted sort of march forward of the music that so alienates many people. A solo oboe holds a sustained G as the music shifts mood, tempo and key to introduce the first scene with the seer Cassandre, whose vision is only of Troy in flames and ruins, with dead bodies everywhere. This is actually set in recitative-and-aria form, but much more like Guck than like Meyerbeer or Gounod (Meyerbeer, in fact, attended the first performance, telling friends that he was “getting an education”; despite their differing styles, the two composers were mutual admirers of each others’ work). Unlike several sections of Meyerbeer’s operas, even a great one like *Le Prophète*, there is no wasted or superfluous music in *Troyens*; all is tightly written and logical. Even the brief orchestral passages between sections of Cassandra’s opening monologue have both a musical and a dramatic function. It’s just that the music is not “pretty.” Audiences can’t hum or sing parts of it on their way out of the theater.

Chorèbe tries to talk Cassandre out of her disturbing visions, but she cannot refuse what she knows. He, too, gets an aria, but again a Gluckian one. Eventually, this leads back into a duet for the two characters; the music again picks up in tempo, but again with Berlioz’ peculiar “backwards” rhythmic feeling that so baffles listeners, even here where certain beats are accented strongly by the tympani. Eventually, the scene is climaxed by a high B for Cassandre, but Berlioz cuts off audience applause for the note by accompanying it with an excited orchestral passage that carries beyond it for a few bars. This is followed by a strange, slow march in the minor for chorus, set to a strange melodic line and constantly vacillating between major and minor, sometimes in neighboring keys.

And this pretty much sums up the difficulty that casual listeners have with *Troyens*. The music is so sophisticated that it’s several pay grades beyond their understanding...and most ca-

⁸ Fraenkel, Gottfried S. (July 1963). "Berlioz, the Princess and Les Troyens". *Music & Letters*. **44** (3): 249–256.

sual operagoers don't *want* sophisticated music. They want conventional rhythms, tunes and climactic high notes, few of which Berlioz was willing to grant them. One of the few is the peppy 3/4 tune that follows this chorus, but even this has a quirky rhythm that people can't hum along with. A friend of mine once told me that he often doesn't recall Berlioz as a 19th-century French composer because his music sounds so modern—and it does. It has far more in common with Stravinsky than it does with Gounod or Massenet.

Énée's entrance, exploding into the high range after a moody, slow orchestral section with clarinets in their chalumeau register, is one of the most dramatic in all of opera. Manrico in *Il Trovatore* wishes HE had an entrance this dramatic; but again, the rhythms sound stiff and the musical machinery moves vertically. Considering this opera's length and its (by now) familiarity with most opera lovers, it would be pointless for me to give a scene-by-scene analysis of this work; even if I did so in a general way, it still would not do this magnificent score full justice. I'd have to pore over the score page by page and point out, technically everything that Berlioz did, and in the end that much scrutiny would spoil the effect of simply listening to it. The whole point of enjoying a work of art of this magnitude is to try to let the technical things pass over you and just admire how brilliantly it all works, and more importantly, works *dramatically*. And yet there are all these fascinating little touches, like the offstage organ behind Cassandre's impassioned singing later in the act. Another example of the difference between Berlioz and not only other French composers but also Verdi comes in the second act, where the ghost of Hector warns Énée to leave Troy and go to Italy, where he will find a new Troy. Berlioz writes this entire scene around perhaps three notes, with one being repeated a number of times as Hector's ghost intones his warning. Meyerbeer or Verdi would have written an aria full of pretty tunes and ending on a high note, which the average audience member would surely hear as "dramatic." The excitable finale to this scene, which includes chorus in the first part, again falls back on Berlioz' "backwards" rhythmic feel, even though it's obviously in 3/4 time.

With that being said, Didon's opening monologue *is* a bit staid musically, at least until she reaches the very fine aria "Chers, Tyriens," taken at a rhythm and tempo that sounds like the fast section of the second movement of Beethoven's second symphony. In the middle section, where Verdi or Meyerbeer would have written a cabaletta, Berlioz simply ups the tempo, adds the chorus, and drives the music home.

Although this has nothing specifically to do with the music, it should be pointed out that Berlioz, a veteran operagoer and one who admired the theatrical effects that both Meyerbeer and Wagner were able to pull off, also filled his stage with eye-catching effects: the fire going on around Cassandre, the huge Trojan horse wheeled into the city, the marching of the chorus, etc. Only rarely did he have just one or two characters just stand there and sing. *Les Troyens*, as we now all know, is as much a treat for the eyes as it is for the ears. This would be his only serious opera to make it to the stage (*Benvenuto Cellini* and *Béatrice et Bénédict* were both comedies), but he pulled out all the stops to make it as entertaining as possible. Because he and the opera were French, of course he had to insert a ballet, but even here he designed a treat for the ear as well as the eye with his "Royal Hunt and Storm" music.

Énée's entrance music in Act III is not quite as stunning as his entrance in Act II, but it is dramatic, announcing the arrival of a hero, and here it is accompanied by a full chorus, tympani and the whole enchilada. The Didon-Énée duet is one of the loveliest things Berlioz ever wrote, music redolent of floral fragrances at night. In Act IV, Scene 2, we hear an aria for Iopas, a secondary character. This is one of the few moments where Berlioz stops the action to have a character reflect on his or her situation, and although it is one of his more attractive melodies, I find it a rare lapse for him. In a second half that takes roughly 2 ½ hours to perform, why pad it by

four minutes with this aria? But perhaps this was a request (or insistence) on the part of De Quercy, the original Iopas in the premiere performance.

But the crowning glory of *Troyens* is Didon's final scene. Running nearly a half hour, it begins with the slightly urgent "Va, mon sœur, l'implorer" and includes the more famous "Adieu, fière cite, qu'un généreux effort." Didon goes through a number of emotional states in the course of this long scene, including the interruption of her thoughts in the very excitable "En mer, voyez! Six vaisseaux! Sept! Neuf!" with Iopas, Anna and Narbal joining her, eventually ending in resignation that she has lost Énée forever. I find it difficult to recall hearing a more effective pre-Immolation Scene finish to an opera; clearly, none since can come up to what Berlioz wrote here. As I mentioned in praising the opening scenes, there is not a wasted note or gesture; everything falls into place brilliantly.

In my view, there are but two recordings of this opera, both of them live, that best represent this extraordinary work: the 2000 performance with Petra Lang (Cassandre), Peter Mattei (Chorèbe), Orlin Anastassov (Hector's Ghost), Ben Heppner (Énée) and Michelle DeYoung (Didon) with the London Symphony conducted by Colin Davis, and the slightly abridged performance in English with Josephine Veasey (Cassandre), Robert Massard (Chorèbe), Dennis Wicks (Hector's Ghost), Jon Vickers (Énée) and Janet Baker (Didon), here with the Royal Opera Covent Garden Orchestra but also conducted by Davis. The sound quality of the latter is very good for a broadcast but not perfect; if, however, you are willing to accept that, I think you will find it even a little better than the later performance.

***Faccio: Amleto* (1865)**

Franco Faccio (1840-1891) was a conductor as well as a composer, in fact Arrigo Boito's assistant at La Scala where he became known as an interpreter of Verdi's music. In fact, until this work was rediscovered in this century by Anthony Barrese, who created a critical edition of the score in 2014, Faccio's composing talents were virtually unknown. Prior to *Amleto*, in fact, he had written *I profughi fiamminghi* which had an unsuccessful premiere at La Scala in November 1863. Undaunted, he chose to scale the mountain and set Shakespeare to music.

He was extremely fortunate, however, in that Boito was his librettist—and, to a certain point, his musical editor. Although there are clearly several moments in this opera redolent of Verdi at his organ-grinding worst, particularly the opening scene which quickly moves from somewhat effective and dramatic music to a sort of merry-go-round tune, by comparison with the Verdi of *Un ballo in Maschera* or the 1857 *Simon Boccanegra*, his work here is, for the most part, on quite a high level for a mid-century Italian.

Being an Italian opera, and one lasting roughly two hours, a great deal of *Hamlet* had to be cut, thus we start with the new king's coronation. Much of Hamlet's music, even here, is dramatic recitative and not terribly tuneful music; even when the rhythm suddenly shifts to an almost tarantella-like 6/8 to represent the festivities, Hamlet is still singing occasional strophic lines rather than bursting into song *à la* the Duke of Mantua. The first solo scene we hear with Hamlet is his duet with Ophelia. Fans of mid-19th-century Italian opera will find this music attractive if not quite as tuneful as Verdi himself; indeed, part of this duet put me in mind of Catalani's *La Wally* or Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*, in their better moments, of course. Still, the severe reduction of Shakespeare's play results in what might be termed the Reader's Digest version of the opera, effective as a relatively short stage drama—it's easily five times better in this respect than Ambroise Thomas' olio of pop music arias and scenes—if not quite what we today imagine as an effective performance of this most complex play.

The biggest drawback is the mere thought of Claudio, for instance, suddenly breaking out into a galloping little song, later taken over by Gertrude (a less jolly character could scarcely be

imagined), but within its expected form, plus the Italians' demand to be entertained, it's really not as bad as one might expect.

Faccio's greatest asset, aside from having a libretto by Boito, was that he took the character of Hamlet seriously, and thus tried to drape his words in appropriate music. Sad to say, he succeeded much better in this respect than Verdi did in the original version of *Boccanegra*. What I particularly liked about the music, however, is that Faccio wrote continuous scenes. There are "solo bits" sung by Claudio, Gertrude, Ofelio and Amleto, but they aren't "stop-the-show-so-you-can-admire-us" arias, and they don't have superfluous high notes. By the time we reach the scene beginning "Prencce – Signor," we can hear Faccio refining his style still further, using dark-sounding low winds and thumping basses to underscore the vocal line, and even when the tempo suddenly quickens and the chorus enters, the music continues to develop, almost as in a string quartet or a symphony.

In Act I, Part II, the music becomes even deeper, opening with a slow passage played by the cellos that surprisingly resembles what Verdi would do several years later in "Ella giammai m'amo" from *Don Carlo*, and even when the tempo picks up and the tenor enters with a sort of arioso, it, too, is closer to the kind of music that Don Carlo sings in Verdi's opera. The duet between the Ghost and Hamlet is very interesting, both musically and dramatically.

Act II opens with rapid but quirky music which heralds the entrance of Polonio, Claudio and Gertrude before Amleto enters to sing "Essere o non essere," or "To be or not to be." Well, of course I was waiting to hear this, and yes, it's somewhat in Italian aria form, but more like Rigoleto's "Pari siamo." There are some high notes, but they come at dramatic points and don't disrupt the musical development but, rather, enhance it. The ensuing duet with Ofelia is also very good; despite being set to a barcarolle rhythm, Faccio uses minor-key harmonies and tries to maintain drama and dignity in the vocal line. This is very fine music; you cannot, for a second, predict where the music is going; there's nothing formulaic about it, yet it keeps developing, becoming more dramatic, with each passing moment. And even when it's over, Polonio enters, and the music tries to put up a false happy front, Faccio is up to those demands as well.

There are also some interesting harmonic shifts in the beginning of the next scene, the "Gran Marcia Danese," which then again becomes more serious (with interesting high strings and harp accompaniment) in the Amleto-Gertrude duet. In the ensuing ensemble scene, Faccio used some very creative cross-rhythms, not unlike the Act I finale of *Don Giovanni*, but more modern. Towards the end of the scene, he uses rising chromatics, rolling timpani and swirling strings to create real dramatic tension behind the singers.

The opening of Act III is dark-sounding music, played lightly by the basses, violas and winds. It is also quite good, combining Italian lyricism with a quite dramatic interpretation of the scene. Again, Faccio used interesting falling chromatics in Gertrude's lines, and interesting cymbal "washes" behind the re-appearance of the Ghost. Ofelia's mad scene is a bit of a disappointment—she just sings a fairly conventional aria and ends on a trill—but it's a huge improvement on Ambrose Thomas. In one section, you hear a typical Boito wind voicing behind Ofelia, similar to that used in the Prologue of *Mefistofele*.

The last act is equally good and equally interesting, despite some fairly ordinary *secco recitative* between Amleto and the Gravedigger. Ofelia's funeral march is, unfortunately, nothing special, in one ear and out the other, but at least it's not offensive. The scenes following return us to very good, interesting music, with great climaxes when called for. The play-within-a-play is somewhat minimized in this performance, but the ending is particularly good, subtle and understated, with good vocal acting from the principals.

After the initial run, Faccio revived *Amleto* in 1871, by which time he was music director at La Scala, but after that it disappeared from the boards. Faccio died in 1871, aged only 51.

Sadly, the only commercial recording of this opera has a rather defective cast. The Hamlet, Pavel Černoch, has a generally good voice, as do Dshamilja Kaiser (Gertrude), but the Ophelia, Iulia Maria Dan, has a squally voice and the Claudio, baritone Claudio Sgura, is wobbly and unpleasant to listen to, but Paolo Carignani's conducting is excellent, pulling the score together in a cohesive fashion and adding to the drama with his incisive, energetic style. With a first-rate cast of singing actors who have both excellent voices and superior dramatic instincts, it's clear that this can be a very effective, if pocket-sized, musical representation of Shakespeare's play.

Verdi: *Macbeth* (1847, revised 1865)

It's somewhat ironic that we end this particular survey with two operatic treatments of Shakespeare, and both by Italian composers dedicated to the entertaining style of opera yet who also had streaks of genuinely dramatic music in their works. I say this is ironic because, when you think of it, by rights it should have been a British composer, but for whatever reason, British composers don't seem to have existed during the long gap between Thomas Arne and Ethel Smyth (just being ironic... there were a few, like John Barnett, but since I don't know any of their works they must have been vastly inferior ones).

In the case of *Macbeth*, what we are dealing with is the revised version, but since Verdi insisted that Ricordi destroy all scores of the earlier version once this one came out and insisted that this be "the" performing version of the opera, very few casts have been willing to revive the earlier version.

And, to be honest, there are only five big differences between the two versions. One is Lady Macbeth's entrance aria; instead of the dramatically gripping "La luce lingua" in Act II, we had a florid coloratura aria, "Trionfai! Securi alfine," a vastly inferior work (which, oddly, bears a resemblance to the music she sings in the banquet scene). Another was the finale of Act III where, in place of the very effective Macbeth-Lady Macbeth duet, Verdi had a rather superfluous (and older styled) aria for Macbeth. The chorus that opens Act IV was also rewritten; the earlier version sounds like something from *Ernani* or perhaps even *Rigoletto* (where it might have fit in, but clearly not in *Macbeth*). The long finale of the opera was massively rewritten from the very first phrase to the final note. The fifth difference, of course, is the ballet, which HAD to be included for Paris, but thankfully is generally only performed once in a while when they do the French version. (I might also point out that the music leading into Macbeth's final aria, "Pieta, rispetto amore," is also too peppy and old-fashioned.) Ironically, the one thing Verdi *should* have changed but didn't was that corny music for the three witches; something close to what Ulrica sings in *Un ballo in Maschera* would have been perfect, but he didn't do it.

After the rather moronic opening ditty of the witches, the opera proper gets started with the surprisingly effective "Giomo non vidi mai si fiero," where Verdi gets down to brass tacks and creates a chilling effect—after which there is an inappropriately peppy chorus that somewhat ruins the effect, although Macbeth brings things back to the minor key and slower, darker music. Interestingly, considering the period in which it was written, Verdi's entrance scene and aria for Lady Macbeth, though following Italian operatic convention of its time, is actually quite excellent: her reading the letter aloud, followed by the excellent "Vieni! T'affretta!" There are some places in this opera where Verdi does create some effective *chiaroscuro* moments, playing light elements against dark ones, the best example, of course, being the banquet scene, but there's also a good one even in Act I, where an orchestral piece that sound like band music is quickly followed by the shockingly dramatic scene for Macbeth, "Sappia la sposa mia... Mi si affaccia un pugnai." The Macbeth-Lady Macbeth duet vacillates, oddly, between surprisingly dramatic music and a semi-happy duet between hubby and wife in 3/4 time. Again, though it moves into bouncy music, the Act I finale is quite gripping.

Yet when you come down to it, all things considered (including the condensing of the play), *Macbeth* isn't really a terrible representation of Shakespeare's drama. Verdi did a good job of portraying Macbeth as someone who wanted power but was too timid to do it on his own, his demonic Lady being the prime motivator of his having to kill his competitor for the throne. In addition, despite the occasional lapses into Italian dance music, most of the darker music is truly dramatic, creating a chilling effect even in the theater. In the context of his 1847 style, even the original Lady Macbeth was a brilliant creation; he used a great deal of imagination in forging her music, and wanted it sung in a "hard, dark, stifled voice," not as a treat for the ear by a lovely-voiced soprano. Had he spent some of his imagination revising the witches' music, it would have been a stronger opera.

When you listen to live performances of this work, however, you really have to wonder about the intelligence of the average opera audience. They clap after everything that has a closed-form ending, even when the music is incredibly dark, dramatic and gripping. Yippie-i-o-ki-yay, he held a high note! Ooh, ooh, they sung a tune! Let's all applaud! One particularly insensitive acquaintance of mine thinks this is just fine, though. "Singers appreciate applause!" But would you clap after a stage actor finishes reciting one of Hamlet's monologues? "Oh, but that's DIFFERENT! They're not singing or holding high notes!" Who cares? That's their job. If they can't sing the role, they have no business up there on stage to begin with. You're supposed to be listening to the music as a dramatic entity, not as a recital in costume. But hey, that's entertainment!

In the case of this opera, there are two outstanding commercial recordings: the original revised version in French with Ludovic Tezier (Macbeth), Silvia Dalla Benetta (Lady Macbeth), Riccardo Zanellato (Banquo) and Giorgio Berrugi (Macduff), conducted by Roberto Abbado, and the Italian-language translated version (the one normally performed) with Sherrill Milnes (Macbeth), Fiorenzo Cossotto as a shockingly dramatic Lady Macbeth (normally she just sang very prettily), Ruggiero Raimondi (Banquo) and José Carreras (Macduff), conducted by Riccardo Muti. I would, however, also recommend one historic recording that is often overlooked, the January 1960 Metropolitan Opera broadcast with Leonard Warren (Macbeth), Leonie Rysanek (Lady Macbeth), Jerome Hines (Banquo) and Daniele Barioni (Macduff), conducted by Erich Leinsdorf. Although most of the cast, and conductor, are identical to the RCA studio recording from 1959, this broadcast is superior in every way. Warren's voice sounds much freer and more open, his interpretation is deeper, Rysanek is almost overpowering as Lady Macbeth, and here Leinsdorf, who conductor a perfunctory performance on the recording, creates a dark, sinister mood that is almost palpable.

And so we finally come to an end of this fairly long chapter, mostly devoted to Verdi, in which we showed how opera was progressing, mostly in the direction of entertainment because that was what was demanded by audiences. Sadly, this wasn't to change much in the next 35 years, but as we will see, there were some surprises in store.

But first, on to Richard Wagner!