THE EARLIEST OPERAS OF GIUSEPPE VERDI WITH EMPHASIS UPON ERNANI

THESIS

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CHAPTER I

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OPERA

During the latter part of the sixteenth century some Italian scholars began to investigate the classic drama of the ancient Greeks. These Florentine scholars, known as the "camerata," helped to start a movement which replaced traditional polyphony with monody, a method of declamation in which the words of the singer were of primary interest. Known as "stile rappresentativo" or "stile parlante" this new idea in music was first employed by Giulio Caccini (1558 or 1560-1615), Emilio del Cavalieri (1550- ?) and Jacapo Peri (1561- ?), and opera, as it is known today, was born.

Jacapo Peri was the first composer to employ the new style of vocal declamation. His first opera, Dafne, written in 1597, is no longer extant. His opera Euridice, written in 1600, is the earliest opera of which the music is still in existence.

In 1607, Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) wrote Orfeo, the first opera written which is still occasionally found in the modern repertoire. In this opera Monteverdi continues the use of monody and in addition expresses human emotions more successfully. He also added the first concrete use of the "aria da capo" and introduced coloratura devices in the role

of Orfeo. Monteverdi especially tried to make his music express the feeling of the text it supported. His orchestral accompaniment, unlike the sparse chords and purely accompanimental character of the first few operas written, was delineative and descriptive. For example, Monteverdi used a contrapuntal ritornello to suggest a church-like atmosphere in the sacrificial scene in Orfeo (temple scene, Act I).[1]

Allessandro Scarlatti (1659-1725) gave opera many new ideas. He prefaced his operas with three-movement overtures (forerunners of the symphony) in the "fast-slow-fast" pattern known as the "Italian Overture." He also helped make permanent the use of the "secco recitative," "recitative stromentato," and solidified the position of the "aria da capo" in the operatic scheme.[2] The history of opera, a long and interesting story, was well on its way and the path for a man of Verdi's stature was being paved.

During the eighteenth-century the Neopolitan school, with its many composers and various phases, produced the florid and sometimes decadent works which gave rise to a great era of singers. To describe the pyrotechnical skills and remarkable perfection of utterance of their singing the term "bel canto"

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[1]Donald Jay Grout, A Short History of Opera (New York, 1956), p. 65.

[2]Waldo Fullerton, Early Italian and French Opera (New York, 1927), p. 39.

has been used. The Neapolitan school was typified by the emphasis placed upon the melodic line. The aria emerged as a highly stylized, well-developed form.[3]

It was during this period of Neapolitan opera that a regular structure was achieved in opera. A sensible formula had been established largely because of the librettists Apostolo Zeno (1668-1750) and Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782). This was the plan that allotted dramatic action to the recitative and slowed down this action for the emotional arias that usually followed.[4] The chorus was used to some extent as were overtures which were not as a rule impressive; both were used consistently, however. The accompaniments were carefully devised so as not to interfere with the singer. Simple ensembles became a feature of these eighteenth-century Neapolitan works. Also, duets frequently appeared.

In the second half of the century many composers strove to break down what was becoming a very rigid framework in the composition of opera. To get away from the strict division of the singing into aria and recitative, these men concentrated on developing the accompaniment of the recitative. With Nicola Jommelli (1714-1774), Tommaso Traëtta (1727-1779) and Christoph Gluck (1714-1787) the arioso, a "style

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[3]Grout, op. cit., p. 185.

[4]Willi Apel, "Recitative," Harvard Dictionary of Music (Cambridge, 1956).

which is midway between that of an aria and a recitative,"[5] was developed and the strict framework that separated the aria from the recitative was thus broken down.

Gluck's position in the composition of opera in later eighteenth-century opera hardly needs mentioning. His idea of reform is neatly summed up in the preface to the score of Alceste, published in Vienna in 1769.

> I have striven to restrict music to its true office of serving poetry by means of expression and by following the situations of the story, without interrupting the action or stifling it with a useless superfluity of ornaments; and I believe that it should do this in the same way as telling colors affect a correct and well-ordered drawing; by a well-assorted contrast of light and shade, which serves to animate the figures without altering their contours.[6]

It is not to eclipse the achievements of the predecessors of Gluck that music historians dwell upon the achievements of this man. It is simply that his works impressively illustrate the very goals for which he aimed. Jommelli, who had many of the same ideas, never quite convincingly displayed them, and Traëtta, a composer strongly influenced by the northern Germans, also broke away from the traditions of the Neapolitan school. The heavier, more spectacular elements of the Germanic works and the picturesqueness of the French can be heard in the works of Jommelli and Traëtta. Their less frequent use of the "recitative

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[5]Martin Cooper, Gluck (New York, 1935), pp. 10-11.

[6]Alfred Einstein, Gluck, pp. 98-99, cited in Grout, op. cit., p. 238.

secco" in exchange for the accompanied ones in which the orchestra played a greater role is in fitting with the reforms in which they played a great part.[7]

Pergolesi (1710-1736), Giovanni Paisiello (1740-1816), contemporaries of Gluck, wrote a type of comic opera (opera buffa) that was later adopted and somewhat refined by Wolfgang Mozart (1756-1791). Comic opera had appeared earlier. Vergilio Mazzochi (d. 1646) and Marco Marazzoli (d. 1662) had written Che Soffre Speri (1639), the earliest independent comic opera, but Venice in the latter half of the seventeenth century was the center of a considerable school of comic opera.

Abolition of the comic episodes in the "reformed" opera librettos of Zeno and Motastasio opened the way for the comic opera as a separate genre with renewed importance. The comic opera of the eighteenth century shows well-defined types. Italian opera buffa began early in the century to evolve from the intermezzi performed between the acts of serious operas. Greatly influenced by the Commedia dell' Arte, this form is the Italian counterpart and, in most instances, predecessor of the French vaudeville and opera-comique, the German singspiel and the English ballad opera.

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[7] Ibid., p. 222.

The French school of opera called "grand opera" developed between 1831 and 1836.[8] Giocomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864) followed the basis already laid by the playwright and librettist Eugene Scribe (1791-1861) with the operatic use of the romantic traits begun by him. The result was Robert Le Diable (1831), the opera that "set the tone" in France for the rest of the century. This "Grand Opera School" was characterized by traits of romanticism: The unity between libretto, scenery and music, plots based on the fantastic and supernatural, the use of subject matter of a historical nature and the emphasis placed on local color.[9]

In Italy the reforms of Gluck had never become the vogue. Yet, in an indirect fashion, Italy and, in fact, nearly all of Europe felt the effects of these reforms. The reforms seeped into Italy indirectly by way of a Bavarian priest, Simon Mayr (1763-1845), who went to Italy at an early age. Dividing his attention between his post as organist at a Milan cathedral and his dedication to composition, Mayr became thoroughly "Italianized" in his writing. He was able to get the somewhat stubborn Italian audiences to accept the more flexible forms and greater use of the orchestra, reform techniques Jommelli had used with less success. Mayr's melodies showed the influence of Mozart. From the French

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[8]William Loran Croster, French Grand Opera (New York, 1956), p. 338.

[9]Ibid., pp. 3-5.

"grand opera" composers he learned to use the chorus in dramatic situations. He drew his librettos from the French also.

Mayr greatly influenced Rossini, helping, thereby, to establish the type of opera which was to dominate the operatic picture of the nineteenth century in Italy. For the next forty years three of Mayr's successors developed new concepts and improved upon the ideas they had inherited from Mayr. These men were Giacchino Rossini (1792-1868), Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848), the three composers whose ideas and styles reached full maturity and expression in the composer who followed them: Giuseppe Verdi.

Rossini, when he went to Paris at the age of thirty-two, had already had a fine career in Italy. Why he, in 1829, retired from his career as an opera composer is a point left uncertain in music history. Had his career continued he might have reached heights as great as those of Verdi. However, his Guillaume Tell, Il Barbiere Di Sivliglia and other operas, have carved a solid niche for him in the world of music.

The principal characteristics of Rossini's works are strong melodies and light, clear texture; his melodic phrases are usually short. These phrases are usually

> of limited range, in a major key, on an extremely simple harmonic basis but usually either having some chromatic passing tones or appoggiaturas, or else

> modulating to the mediant at some point; the basic motif will be a strongly marked, easily remembered figure, often in 6/8 or dotted rhythm, . . . repeated many times without important contrasting material.[10]

Coloratura passages were included but these were usually written out by the composer rather than left to the discretion of the singer. This was done in the hopes that the performer would not abuse the melodic line while exploiting his vocal prowess.[11] Dramatic, flexible voices sang these passages slowly and expressively to give the true import of the drama of the opera. Today these passages are often performed too rapidly. Rossini, also, wrote for a type of voice largely neglected until this time: the contralto or mezzo-soprano. This type of voice is assigned the leading role in such operas as L'Italiana in Algeri (1813) and Il Barbieri di Siviglia (1816). Also, Rossini was one of the last to write for castrato.[12]

Donizetti, a pupil of Mayr, wrote melodies which were more romantic and robust than Rossini's. This was the result of the influence which Meyerbeer and the "grand opera school" had on Mayr. Donizetti composed rapidly, turning out his work quickly and with little alteration once it was on paper. His works, therefore, are not usually as perfect in detail as Rossini and, especially, Bellini. Rossini largely set the standard of taste while Donizetti followed in his footsteps

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[10] Grout, op. cit., p. 338.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., p. 343.

and carried on these traditions. These standards largely consisted in the emphasis placed upon the melodic line, in the subordination of the orchestra and in the light texture of the compositions.

Bellini (1801-1835) also followed Rossini. His melodies were purer and more elegant than those of Donizetti and Rossini, although his melodies were often melancholy. In his writing the orchestra is subordinant to the vocal line. His melodies are truly appealing for their pureness and simplicity and they often display the great dramatic powers of the composer. In such works as Norma, I Puritani and La Somnambula it is evident that Bellini was a master of the writing of recitative, as, for example, the opening of Act II ("Dormono entrambi") of Norma.[13]

Bellini was a perfectionist, for he carefully studied and altered his libretti and often revised the music extensively before he was satisfied. The libretto to the aria "Casta Dive" from Norma, for example, was revised eight times before he was satisfied.[14]

Bellini, too, wrote for the singers in a style that often required coloratura technique. Coloratura passages were even written for the basses. Although this tradition was dying, it continued up to Verdi. Verdi wrote some coloratura passages, especially in such early works as

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[13] Ibid., p. 339.

[14] Ibid., p. 344.

Nabucco, Luisa Miller and Rigoletto (for example, the aria "Caro nome" in Rigoletto).

In Verdi's writing, the great influence of these three composers can be seen in various characteristics. From Rossini he inherited the vital melodies which are the most important single element in Verdi's writing. He continued and extended the use of the chorus. This new emphasis on choral action and participation will be discussed in chapter III. The basic motives of Verdi's operas are, like Rossini's, easily remembered and not excessively ornamented for the period. Also, Verdi realized the beauty of the mezzo-soprano and cast many important roles for that voice, as in Il Trovatore and Aida. Usually Verdi wrote subdued music for the orchestra when it was accompanying the singers and gave emphasis to the chorus in the overtures and internal preludes.

From Donizetti he inherited the more bloody, melodramatic flair for the stage that invades so many of Verdi's operas. Also, important lines were often sung by the chorus.

During the earliest years of Verdi's career the influence of Bellini on Verdi's melodies is easily seen. Verdi found Bellini's orchestration and harmony weak but the melancholy and romanticism of his melodies appealed to Verdi. To Rossini, his debt is more definite, more obvious.

For instance, the theme of the "Si Vendetta" duet in Rigoletto, Act II, is much like some of the passages in Otello.

Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti are not the only composers who directly influenced Verdi. In later life Meyerbeer had a certain influence on the composer, largely because Verdi was commissioned to write an opera for the Paris Opera where the ideas of Meyerbeer were still in effect. The opera was Don Carlo, a score that has been said to have the melodic germs connected with Wagnerism.[15] Upon closer observation it can be seen that this so-called "influence" of Wagner on Verdi in Don Carlo was merely circumstantial for the same use of motifs in Verdi's operas can be found as early in his writing as Ernani. Further discussion of Ernani can be found in chapter IV.

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) also had an influence on Verdi but more in the sense of general ideas than definite compositional devices. From Berlioz, Verdi learned some ideas about scoring. However, the influence of Berlioz and Meyerbeer came later in Verdi's life than the compositions with which this study is concerned, for it was in the style of Rossini and the other Italian writers of the period that

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[15]Francis Toye, Giuseppe Verdi (London, 1940), p. 3.

Verdi wrote his early works. He carried the traditions of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti to their highest peak before turning to the more subtle and sophisticated style of the later romantic period.[16]

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[16]Grout, op. cit., p. 137.

CHAPTER II

EARLY YEARS OF THE COMPOSER

The greater part of Verdi's life (1813-1901) comes within the period of political history referred to as the Risorgimento.[1] It was not until he was fifty-seven years old that the unification of the various Italian states was achieved and that Rome was made the capital of the new country. The early years of his life were years of political upheaval. In 1813 the peninsula now called Italy consisted of a number of small states with as many petty earls and dukes whose overlord was Napoleon. Defeat of the Emperor at Leipzig in 1814 by Russian and Austrian armies brought a change so that the next year the French were turned out of the country.[2] This was not achieved before a great deal of

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[1]The Risorgimento was an awakening in Italy during the eighteenth century to literary and artistic beauty; philosophical and political consciousness replaced the sterility of thought and idleness generally prevalent in that country before about 1830. Gradually, the scattered states of Italy became unified and a country emerged. Progress and ambition were substituted for ignorance and a lack of concern for the welfare of the country. The new interest in life and beauty was reflected in politics where freedom of spirit vented itself into a desire to drive out Austria and other countries that had troubled the Italians. Greenfield, Kent Roberts, Economics and Liberalism in the Risorgimento (Baltimore, 1934), pp. 284-297.

[2]Frances Toye, Giuseppe Verdi (London, 1940), p. 3.

violence and turmoil had caused the inhabitants of some of the villages a great deal of grief. A wandering troop of French soldiers pursued by the Russian and Austrian troops entered Le Roncole, a small village near Busseto. Many of the citizens fled in terror, among these Luigia Verdi with her infant son, Giuseppe. Hiding in the belfry of the church, both were spared from death at the hands of the plundering soldiers. It is fortunate that Luigia Verdi had the presence of mind to hide in such a secluded spot, for the infant she saved was to become the greatest operatic composer of Italian History.

Carlo Verdi, the boy's father, had registered young Giuseppe's birth on October 12, 1813, two days after the infant's birth, with the French authorities at Busseto. Had the boy been born the next year he would have been registered with the Austrian authorities.

Young Giuseppe was an inhibited child. The warlike atmosphere in which he was born seemed to have had its effect on the lad for he was "a queer mixture of shyness and fierceness, and we are told that nothing brought him out of himself except music."[3] During his youth the frequent though somewhat limited music heard in his little home town impressed the boy to a great extent. The strolling minstrels, the music in the church, and the local marching band all

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[3]Dyneley Hussey, Verdi (New York, 1931), p. 4.

fascinated him and eventually his every ambition was turned to music.

However, the boy's alert mind compelled his father to encourage the boy to enter the clergy. Soon Giuseppe was enrolled as an assistant to the priest at the little church in Le Roncole. During one of the services the boy became so enraptured with one of the phrases being played at the organ that the priest could not get his attention. The priest, after several attempts to rouse the boy to his senses, finally gave him such a push that Giuseppe was sent sprawling down the steps of the altar. After the boy arrived home, his parents, seeing the visible signs of his fall, asked him what had happened. His only reply was a request to be allowed to study music.

The village organist, Baistrocchi, became his first teacher. The boy advanced quickly, for it was only three years later that he replaced his old master at the post as church organist when the old man retired.

As a consequence of the adverse influence of the tales of horror told about the war and of the general turmoil of the times, Giuseppe was a sober, serious boy. He never ceased to take pleasure in music, however, although opportunities to enjoy superior music were rare. The Busseto municipal band was the chief performing organization and despite the efforts of some historians to prove that this band excelled in every way there is really no reason to believe that it excelled

either in the programs selected or in the performances rendered.[4]

Though Verdi's genius was not the kind associated with prodigies like Mozart, his gift was obvious and sufficient to impress his parents and the inhabitants of the little village. His father, a poor merchant, but anxious to see his son's talents mature, sent him to nearby Busseto to live while attending school. On Sundays, he walked back to Le Roncole to play for the church service. Busseto had a small Philharmonic Society. A wholesale warehouse owner there, Antonio Barezzi (d. 1687), was its President, and he took Giuseppe in as an apprentice so that the boy might earn enough to study with the best tutors in the town.

Verdi soon won many opportunities to work with the society; his works, marches and overtures, were occasionally performed by the group and he was soon involved in all of the musical affairs of the organization. His early compositions for the Philharmonic Society were later destroyed by Verdi for, musically, they doubtless had little value. But under the guidance of the director, Ferdinando Provisi (d. 1834), he was beginning to learn the fundamentals of composition.

Despite the great enthusiasm of Verdi's teachers and the encouragement received from many of the townspeople the training he received must have been somewhat inadequate; Busseto was not a cultural center and his teachers were

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[4]Ferrucio Bonavia, Verdi (London, 1930), p. 5.

limited in their knowledge. This was proved when the young man attempted to enter the Concervatorio in Milan and failed to pass the entrance examinations. That he was talented was not denied, but Verdi was several years older than the age limit and also lacking in training in music theory. At the age of eighteen he had met his first failure. He was bitterly disappointed but, nevertheless, took the advice of one of the examiners who advised him to go to the Scala Theatre where he might study with Lavigna.[5] Verdi studied diligently at the Scala and apparently made remarkable progress for he passed an examination that all twenty-eight of the other examinees had failed. This was an examination given by the director of the Milano Concervatorio, Basily, for a post with the Philharmonic. The problem to be solved was an exercise in fugal writing and Verdi solved it quickly.

It was not long before the young man was commissioned to write a cantata. Also, an opera libretto was given to him by the director of the Philharmonic and Verdi was urged to set it to music.

While Verdi was having such good fortune in Milan, his old teacher from Busseto, Provesi, died. Barezzi, who befriended and aided Verdi in Busetto, felt it would be an excellent idea for Verdi to return from Milan and take over the post as organist in the Busetto Cathedral in place of

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[5]Toye, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

Provesi. Verdi, who not only wanted the post but who had fond memories of Barezzi's daughter, Margherita, decided to return home.

The ecclesiastical authorities had a candidate of their own, however. Despite the efforts of Barezzi, Verdi and the townspeople, the candidate chosen was not Giuseppe Verdi. Not to be outdone, the people in the community began to withdraw their subsidies from the music fund. The clergy, because of the lack of sufficient contributions, were forced to pay the organist's salary out of their own earnings. The nearby Franciscan Friars, furthermore, were persuaded to let Verdi, whom the community had appointed "Master of Music to the Commune of Busetto," conduct the choral music for their services. The performances in this little church were of such excellence that the authorities in the Cathedral soon noticed more and more empty benches greeting them when their services were held. The townspeople preferred the excellent music provided by Verdi in the little church of the Friars.

The few ensuing years in Busetto were not especially productive ones for Giuseppe. He was too busy conducting the band, working with the Philharmonic Society as conductor, composer and piano soloist, and writing music for the Franciscans to do much in the way of serious concentration upon improving his skills. He was happy, however, probably more because of his marriage to Margherita Berazzi on May 14, 1837, than because of his many duties in the community. But, in

the meantime, the libretto to the Opera Verdi had been urged to write had been improved by Themistocles Solera to such an extent that he began to set it to music. The opera was finished a year after his marriage to Margherita.[6] Early in 1839 Verdi left Busetto for Milan and with him were his young wife, his son and his daughter. He decided it was time he returned to his friend Masini the libretto given to Verdi several years before and with it the finished score of the opera.

CHAPTER III

VERDI'S EARLIEST OPERAS

Considerable time passed before Masini could make arrangements to get Verdi's first opera performed, but the time did come and the public of Milan was to hear his first operatic effort, Oberto, Conte Di San Bonifacio. Giuseppina Strepponi, who became Verdi's second wife after the death of Margherita, was selected as the prima donna for the role of Leonora.

Oberto, Conte Di San Bonifacio was produced in Milan on November 17, 1839, and was a modest success.[1] The work had its weaknesses; the plan of the opera was weak for it was made up of two very long acts, the choral parts were ordinary, lacking any originality, and the work in general revealed Verdi's youthful lack of organization and scholarship insofar as handling the libretto was concerned.[2]

The use of the chorus in Oberto was largely in the manner of Verdi's predecessors. The chorus played little part in the dramatic import of the work, simply adding volume, commenting on the action of the principals (as in

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[1]Bonavia, Verdi, p. 26.

[2]Ibid., p. 27.

Greek dramas) and adding volume to the finales. The sententiousness of this choral writing seems out of place and unrealistic.[3]

Also, the characterizations are weak for the personages are nearly all typed rather than individualized, except for Leonora, "a decidedly wooden ancestress of her great descendants in Il Trovatore and La Forza Del Destino."[4]

Few of the arias have the impact they should, although Riccardo's arias are more expressive and more melodically successful than the arias of the other characters.[5]

When Verdi wrote Oberto, operas based on historical backgrounds were fashionable and the composer accepted this fact without any attempt towards adaptation of the libretto to his own temperament. The result was a libretto that often did not say what the music did, but it was on a subject popular during the times, that of historical figures similar to the leading political figures of the time. The influence of politics on Verdi cannot be overlooked. He played a part in the movement for the unification of Italy. In fact, in his later operas he often had a great deal of difficulty with the censors who suspected "revolutionary

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[3]Toye, Giuseppe Verdi, p. 226.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., p. 227.

sentiments"[6] in the songs of his operas and in the subjects he chose to write about. When he arrived in Milan he had no intention of participating in the efforts for a revolution. But, Italy's primary need for the time was not an artistic one, for a country held in subjection is primarily concerned with removing the enemy. Young Verdi soon found himself an indirect participant in these political affairs and he proved that "music can be an instrument of war as well as of peace."[7]

Oberto touched the hearts of the public by the sheer impetuosity of its songs. At times they are almost savage songs, ones that would incite a mob to rebellion; and, on the other hand, there are some that contain a melancholy that makes them nobler than the type of sadness found in the arias of Bellini or Donizetti. Such qualities as these are the characteristics that Verdi affirmed in succeeding operas and through which he became the anointed musical poet of the resurrection of Italy.[8]

In the autumn of 1846 Verdi was commissioned to write a comic opera for La Scala. The libretto chosen was

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[6]Bonavia, op. cit., p. 20.

[7]Ibid., p. 23.

[8]Gino Roncaglio, L'Ascensione Creatrice di Giuseppe Verdi (Florence, 1940), pp. 23-24.

Il Finito Di Stanislao, called Un Giorno Di Regno in the operatic version, although the original name was used in one Venitian production. Unfortunate circumstances made the completion of this work nearly impossible. In 1838 Verdi's daughter, Virginia, died. In 1839, shortly after the production of Oberto, his son, Icilio Romano, died. While he was composing the comic opera his wife also passed away. Verdi, ill, alone, and seriously beset by financial worries, could not write sufficiently cheerful motives for a work of this sort. The public that read the designation "melodrama giocoso" under one title of the opera in the posters advertising the work must have been quite disconcerted when on the evening of September 5, 1840, they found themselves confronted by this new work of Verdi's. The composer seems to have stressed too much of the seriousness of the characters rather than their comic aspects and he made them sing like tragic heroes. In fact, not only were the libretto and the music inappropriate to each other, but the whole work seemed an "inferior copy of Donizetti and Rossini, without the grace of the one or the exuberant sparkle of the other."[9]

Bitterly disappointed over the failure of this opera, Verdi decided to give up the composition of opera. The thought of writing again made him angry and even caused

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[9]Toye, op. cit., p. 228.

occasional disagreements when others mentioned writing to him. Verdi, himself, told later how the impresario, Merelli, one evening had put the libretto of Nabucco in Verdi's pocket after Verdi had become angry at Merelli's proposal to set the plot to music. Compelled to carry it home Verdi threw the libretto on the table with an almost angry gesture and it fell open to the page on which he read the verse: "Va pensiero sull'ali dorate!"[10] Attracted by the beautiful metaphor, he continued to read a little. These verses in Solera's text kept going through his mind. When he retired for the evening he had to return to the libretto, which he read three times before he was satisfied. He returned the book to Merelli who, when he found that Verdi was pleased with it, thrust it back into the composer's pocket, sent him out of the office and told him not to return until the opera score was finished.

Once having read the book, Verdi was inspired with new songs to write into this work. As he wrote later, "At twenty-six years of age it was too late to do anything else and I did not have strong enough health to go back to my farm."[11]

At length the work was completed and, on the evening of March 9, 1842, Nabucco was presented to the public at

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[10]"Go my thoughts on wings of gold!"

[11]Roncaglia, op. cit., p. 32.

La Scala. It was a triumph; in fact, such a triumph that the composer, seated in the orchestra pit, was frightened when he heard the roaring of the crowd at the close of the first performance.

Nabucco is probably the best of all the early operas by Verdi. There are other operas that contain finer passages but as an entity Nabucco stands above them. Weak points abound, to be sure; the marches are trite; some of the arias are too conventional; the orchestra is alternatingly weak and noisy. But, these words from a great biographer support the work:

> . . . . I do not think that any person capable of getting beneath the surface of the score . . . can fail to appreciate the vigor, the fine dramatic quality of this music. Even the overture, as Roncaglia points out, was the first since "William Tell" to be linked with the development of the theatrical action. . . . Nabucco is essentially a production of genius, more, not less, lovable because of certain youthful crudities, certain obvious flaws.[12]

Verdi's next opera, I Lombardi Alla Prima Crociata, was set to a libretto by Solera. Solera seems to have written it in a "fury of romanticism" and Verdi overlooked many of its flaws.[13] This opera is odd in that it contains the extremes of excellence and grotesqueness. Some of the music in it is absurd (especially the marches which are very weak) and some of it is excellent. The best features are

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[12] Toye, op. cit., pp. 233-234.

[13] Ibid., p. 236.

in the choral writing and in the ensemble writing. This strength was developed by the composer in the writing of Nabucco.[14]

I Lombardi was completed eleven months after the production of Nabucco. It, as all the other libretti before, was based on a biblical theme.

In the production of I Lombardi Verdi's first problems with the censorial interference developed. It seems that a certain Cardinal Gaisruck, Archbishop of Milan, had been led to believe that a conversion and a baptism and other religious intimacies which he felt should not be represented on stage were in the opera. But, even moreso, the book from which Soleri took his libretto, Gioberti's The Moral and Civil Primacy of the Italians was a plea for the unification of Italy. A very trivial change in the text was agreed to, however, and the opera proceeded in its production. This was not to be Verdi's first encounter with the censors. It certainly was an aid in publicity, though, for, as the news spread that there had been a dispute with the Censorship, more and more people packed the streets to wait for admission. The opera was a success, not so much with the critics as with the public.

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[14] Ibid., pp. 238-240.

Verdi's reputation as a composer had put him in a position equal to that of Rossini and Donizetti by this time. The management of the Teatro La Venice in Venice produced I Lombardi and commissioned him to write a new one; and, despite flattering offers from Merelli, he accepted it. His suggestion of I Due Foscari was rejected by the management so he accepted the theater director's suggestion to let Francesco Piave (1810-1876) turn Victor Hugo's Hernani into a libretto.

CHAPTER IV

THE OPERA ERNANI

The opera Ernani, the only opera of Verdi's early period still occasionally performed, was Verdi's fifth operatic effort. In the choice of libretto for this work the composer detached himself from subjects with a religious background and wrote on a more realistic, historical subject. Because of the universality of the subject, Ernani is more appealing than any of the composer's previous works. For Ernani is an opera of love, the love of three men for one woman. These men give the opera an interest determined not only by their conflicting passions but also by their different personalities. There are, therefore, four strong personalities predominant in the opera. They are: Ernani, a bandit chief who attempts to capture Elvira; Don Silva, a middle-aged grandee of Spain who is a man of tradition and honor; Don Carlos, King of Spain who declares his love to Elvira in the first act; and Elvira, niece and betrothed of Don Silva.

The story begins in the mountains of Aragon at the Moorish castle of Don Ruy Gomez de Silva. It is almost sundown and a group of mountaineer rebels and bandits are eating and drinking. They join in a rollicking chorus

lauding the free life of a bandit. Their leader, Ernani, is somewhat morose for he is in love with Elvira who is soon to marry her guardian, Don Silva. Ernani rashly determines to carry away Elvira and implores his companions to aid him.

The scene changes to Elvira's richly adorned room in Silva's castle. It is night, and while she is singing of her longing for Ernani, for she returns his affection, attendants interrupt her to bring her bridal gifts and congratulate her on the marriage plans.

Don Carlos, King of Spain, is announced; he has come to offer his love to Elvira. He is rejected and, upon learning that her affections are for a bandit chief, is about to carry her off when Ernani dashes in to carry out his plans.

Carlos and Ernani recognize each other for, although not clearly pointed out in the libretto, Carlos had killed Ernani's father years before and confiscated all of their family possessions, thereby causing Ernani to lose his noble rank. Ernani challenges the king but, at that moment, Silva returns and immediately senses that these two men are his rivals. He challenges both of them to a duel and, not realizing that Carlo is the king, is about to charge Carlos when Don Ricardo, the royal armour-bearer, enters, thereby revealing Don Carlos' identity. Silva, realizing Carlos is the king, falls on his knees and asks for forgiveness. The king, to prevent further fighting, enlists Ernani as a

follower, but Ernani is not moved from his plans to take revenge on Carlos when he finds the opportunity.

Act II opens in Silva's castle in a magnificent salon where family portraits adorn the wall. A pilgrim enters the room where he is welcomed by Silva who pledges his hospitality according to an ancient Castilian custom.

As Elvira enters in her bridal finery. The pilgrim throws off his cloak and reveals his true identity. He is Ernani. Ernani offers himself as a wedding present. His followers are all slain and he is being closely pursued by the King and his men, for Ernani now has a price on his head.

Having offered his protection, Silva goes off to see to the defense of the castle against Ernani's pursuers. Elvira and Ernani, alone, confess their irresistible love for each other and are found by Silva, upon his return, in each other's arms. He would take immediate vengeance but an attendant, at that moment, announces that the king and his soldiers are at the gate where they are demanding entrance. Silva, torn between the desire for vengeance and his duties as a host, hides Ernani in a secret closet behind one of the ancestral portraits. Meanwhile, Carlos, on finding his entrance barred, has demanded that the fugitive be turned over to him or he will destroy the castle and execute its owner. Silva refuses to violate the sacred laws of

hospitality. Carlos, therefore, enters and demands Elvira as hostage. Silva almost breaks his resolution, but his loyalty to tradition holds out. After they have left, he challenges Ernani to a duel. Ernani refuses out of respect for Silva's age and position, and out of desire to live long enough to rescue Elvira from the clutches of Carlos. In order to appease Silva, Ernani gives him his horn and swears that at any time after they have avenged Elvira's kidnapping Silva may blow the horn and Ernani's life will be his.

The third act discloses Carlos in meditation before the subterranean tomb of Charlemagne while the imperial electors are sitting in a meeting to decide whether Carlos shall succeed Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor. Having been warned that a band of conspirators are plotting his life and will meet in this place, Carlos has decided to hide in the tomb himself and discover the identities of the plotters. Presently the conspirators arrive, among them Ernani and Silva. Lots are drawn to see who shall kill the king. The lot falls to Ernani who refuses to give the privilege to Silva even in return for the horn and its accompanying significance.

Three cannon shots, the prearranged signal to announce that Carlos has been elected Emperor if that is the decision, are heard. Carlos emerges from the tomb while courtiers and soldiers crowd into the vault to capture Ernani and the

others. Carlos orders the noblemen among them killed and the rest thrown into prison. Ernani announces his identity as Don Juan of Argon, thereby claiming the right to death, but Carlos, owing to Elvira's entreaties and his own responsibilities as Emperor, not only pardons the conspirators but gives Elvira to Ernani for marriage.

The fourth act, scene of the wedding festivity for the marriage of Ernani and Elvira, opens with a festive celebration. A love duet between the bride and groom-to-be is interrupted by a horn blast heard from the distance. Ernani, realizing with horrible dread the significance of the sound, dismisses Elvira on some pretext and awaits Silva's arrival. Silva appears and despite fervent appeals for mercy insists that Ernani die. He offers a choice between poison and the dagger. Ernani chooses the dagger and is about to stab himself when Elvira rushes in. Her prayers are equally unavailing on Silva and as the curtain falls Ernani stabs himself and falls dead with Elvira collapsing prostrate and insensible upon his body.

Francesco Piave (1810-1876), using Victor Hugo's Hernani as a basis for the libretto, seems to have kept all the main ingredients of the play, but dispensed with many of the details. By so doing, the story is difficult to understand and at times is almost incredible. For example, in the first act of the original play the true identity of

Ernani is revealed at the same time Silva discovers that Carlo is this king. Ernani is, himself, of noble birth and is seeking to avenge the death suffered by his father at the hands of Don Carlos. This is not true in the opera, for not until the last act does one know who Ernani really is. Also present in the play but missing in the opera is the scene in which Ernani and Elvira had planned to elope. They were confronted by Don Carlos who was then thwarted in his attempt to capture Ernani. Carlos and his men were captured and reduced to virtual impotence. With such a turn of events Ernani could easily have killed Don Carlos and thus have avenged his father's death. He chose, however, to be magnanimous and set the king free. With this knowledge Don Carlos's clemency toward Ernani in the third act of the opera would be quite plausible. Much of this remains obscure in the opera, however.

It is difficult to understand why Carlos, a villain in the first two acts, suddenly becomes a heroic and merciful Emperor just when he has it in his power to be cruel and punish his old enemies.

Silva is quite ridiculous in both the play and the opera. He is the romantic conception of old Dr. Bartolo, yet, according to one biographer, he is the most successful character, musically. This is possibly because his character portrayal happened to coincide with Verdi's own temperament, "a choleric, vigorous one."

Carlos is perhaps the most poorly delineated character of the opera, since he is divided into two rather incompatible personalities, the personality of the cruel king in the first two acts and the personality of the generous, heroic Emperor in the last act.

Verdi overlooked the opportunity, as did Piave, of making an even greater tragedy by not following the original text more closely. In the original there is no dagger; poison is used by Ernani to kill himself. After a rapid discussion in a scene of pleading, Elvira drinks the poison and is followed by Ernani. They fall into each other's arms and, as Elvira complains of growing cold, her blood turning to ice, Ernani promises to love her forever in heaven. He turns to Silva, tells him not to disturb them for they are in their bridal bed, whereupon they die. Realizing the great error he has committed, Silva suddenly kills himself.

Perhaps this finale was too romantic for even the romanticists but it is certainly a superior conclusion. It would have been much more effective if Elvira had also killed herself rather than just collapsing at the end. Also, the knowledge that Silva escapes justice is disturbing to a modern listener who expects a balance of justice and a moral.

The Musical Score

Melodic Structure

The opera itself contains most of the characteristics generally associated with Verdi's early compositions. The main forte of the composer's work lies, therefore, in the melodic line, for it is here that he concentrates most of the dramatic interest. The wide-ranged, rather florid arias are typical of Verdi's writing and are excellent examples of the preoccupation, during this period, with the melodic line. For the most part the melodies are constructed in short phrases of regular length, usually of two, four or eight measures.

When the singer is performing, the orchestra has no counter-melodies or any other special interest. It usually merely plays a rhythmic-accompaniment pattern or duplicates the melodic line. As the piece becomes more dramatic the orchestra usually duplicates the melody in octaves. (See Figure 1.)

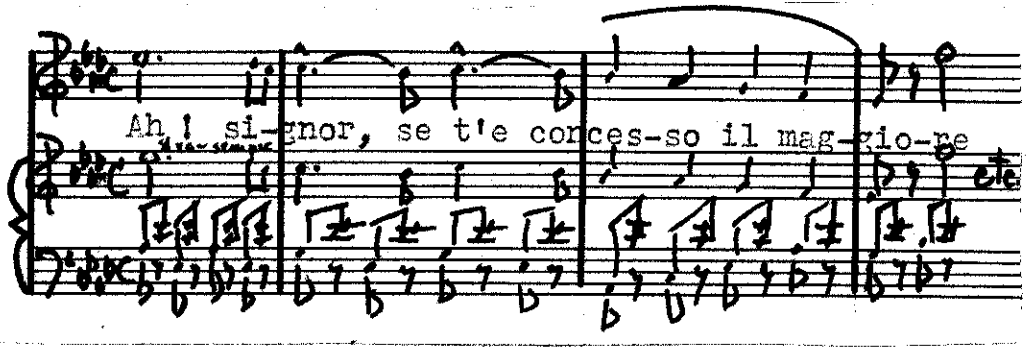

Fig. 1--Verdi, Ernani, Act III, p. 184, measures 15-17

Often the vocal line is emphasized by the accompaniment. This is especially done in Elvira's music which is usually flowing and melancholy. In contrast the orchestra often has a crisp, staccato pattern, the typical rhythm accompaniment. (See figure 2.) Also, the orchestra often has a florid

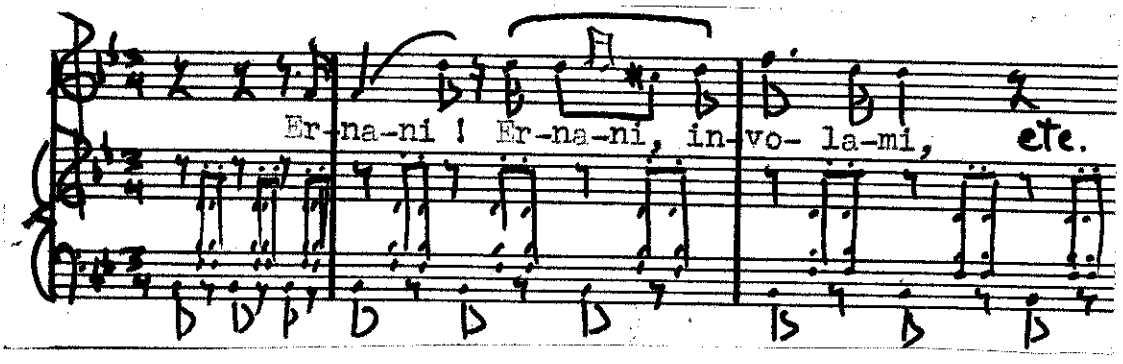

Fig. 2--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, p. 24, measures 9-11

passage, the interest being shifted momentarily to the orchestra while the vocal line is sustained on a single note (usually a high note). This occurs in the aria "Ernani involami" in Act I (see figure 3) and in the duet, "Solingo, errante e misero" in the last act.[1]

Fig. 3--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, p. 25, measures 8-9

[1]Giuseppe Verdi, Ernani (New York, 1926), p. 184.

Considerable melodic interest is assigned to the orchestra when it is not serving as an accompaniment, as in the overture and internal preludes. In the overture, for example, several themes appear; not only are they interesting at that moment but they recur in the opera. The first theme (see figure 4) is the pact motive heard in Act III

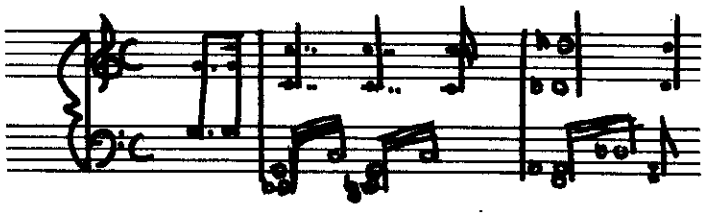

Fig. 4--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, p. 1, measures 4-6

when Ernani gives Silva the horn and promises his life in exchange for cancellation of the duel so that he may rescue Elvira. This same theme is heard in the last act when Silva arrives to claim his rights to Ernani's life. In the overture the theme is stated in C major, in the third act it is stated in F major and in the last act it is heard in G major.

Whenever duets appear they are constructed homophonically, usually by having one voice duplicate the melody of the other a third higher or lower. This is done, for example, in the baritone-tenor duet of Silva and Ernani in Act II, "A te, scegli, seguimi." (See figure 5.) Verdi's great understanding of the qualities of human voices is evident in this passage, for he wrote both of these vocal

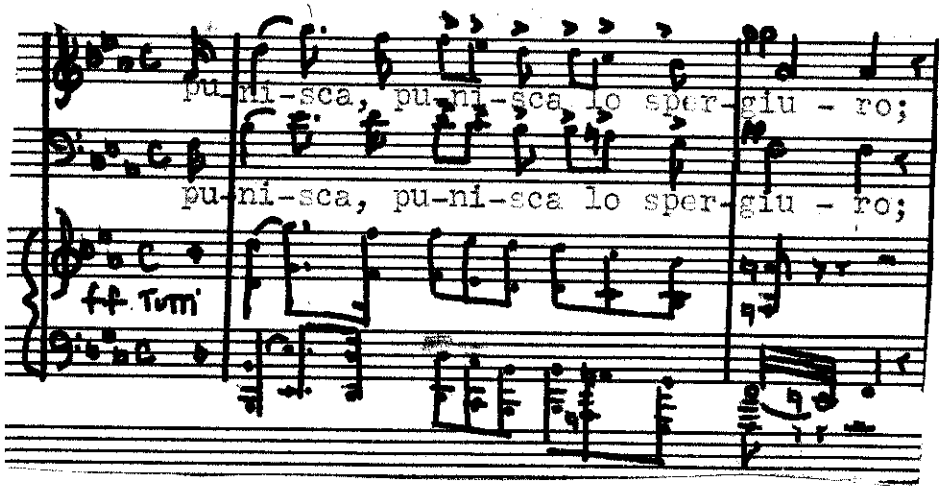

Fig. 5--Verdi, Ernani, Act II, p. 151, measures 7-9

lines in a high tessitura which produces a thrilling vocal effect.

These duets are not always constructed in thirds, however, for the composer greatly favored writing in unison for duets and ensembles. Also, the parts often simply alternate, both lines being melodic and interrupting each other.

Semitones and whole tones are used throughout the composition in the melodic line. Often little patterns appear and are repeated with each repetition appearing a half-step or step higher or lower than the previous one. This occurs, for example, in the little prelude to the recitative and duet "Da quel di che lo veduto" in Act I. (See figure 6.) Also, a little descending figure is found

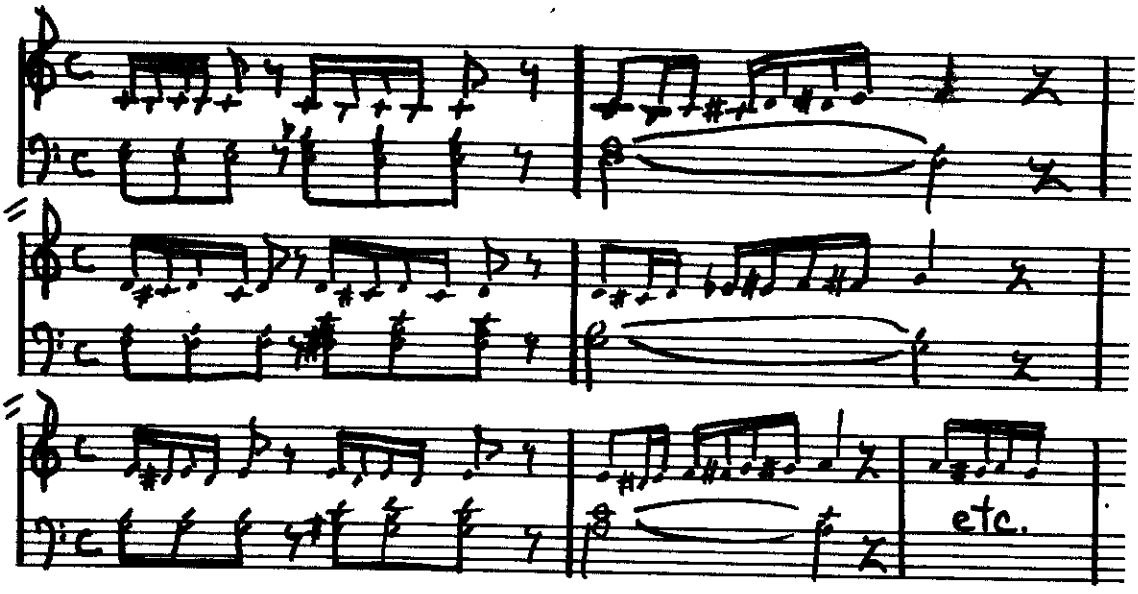

Fig. 6--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, p. 34, measures 1-7

repeatedly in the opera. It first appears at the entrance of Elvira in Act I. (See figure 7.) This figure, originally in half notes and beginning on b-flat appears in various

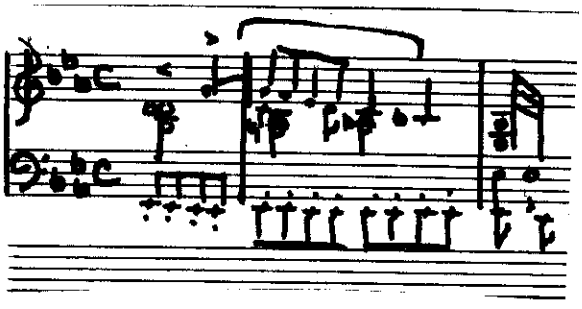

Fig. 7--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, p. 23, measures 9-10

other note values and begins on various other pitches. This can be seen in the finale to Act II where it is preceded by

a little glissando[2] and in the conspiracy scene.[3] Strangely enough, this figure does not appear in the overture.

The use of descending intervals is also a common device in Ernani. This creates an effect of sadness or melancholy. Elvira is assigned most of these sad intervals since she is delineated as the most melancholy of the personages. An excellent example of this occurs in her aria in the first act, "Ernani involami." (See figure 8.)

Fig. 8--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, p. 30, measures 6-7

The solo vocal numbers are of three types, the aria, the cabaletta[4] and the cavatina.[5] There are also duets,

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[2]Ibid., p. 156.

[3]Ibid., p. 170.

[4]"A short operatic song characterized by popular style and natural simplicity, with a rather uniform rhythm in the vocal line and in the accompaniment. . . . In later Italian opera (Verdi) the term was applied to the final stretto close of arias or duets in which elaborate treatment usually gives way to quick, uniform rhythm." Willi Apel, "Cabaletta," Harvard Dictionary of Music (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1945).

[5]"In 18th- and 19th- century operas and oratorios, a short solo song simpler in style than the aria and without repetition of words or phrases. The proper form for the cavatina would seem to be in one section without repetition (except for a short instrumental anticipation of the beginning of the song), in other words, just a 'sentence' set to music. . . ." Ibid., "Cavatina."

trios and larger ensemble numbers. These are skillfully connected by the use of the recitative (both _secco_ and _accompagnato_) and arioso-like passages. One of the most common devices Verdi uses to connect the arias and the recitatives is the use of the semi-cadence. The unresolved dominant chord that ends many of the recitative sections is resolved in the opening phrase of the following aria, thus neatly bridging the two. Also, the use of the cabelatta, as in "Come tugiada al cespite" in Act I,[6] and the cavatina, as in "Gran Dio! coster sui sepolcrali" in Act III,[7] helps to break the monotony sometimes resultant from the use of only arias and recitatives. Thus, in moments that merit the emphasis of melodic development but not the development of a full-blown aria, Verdi uses a shorter aria-like number. These cavatinas, cabalettas, arias and recitatives provide a great deal of variety in the utterance of the vocal lines.

The vocal melodies cover a very wide compass. The singer is often required to sing over a range of two octaves or more. In the aria "Ernani involami" Elvira sings over two octaves in one phrase alone. (See Figure 9.)

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[6]Verdi, _op. cit._, p. 13.

[7]_Ibid._, p. 163.

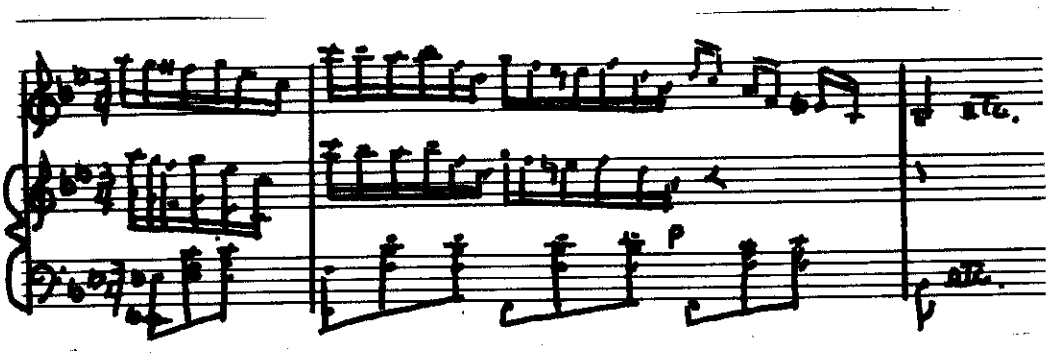

Fig. 9--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, p. 25, measures 5-7

Several melodic devices are commonly used for dramatic purposes. For example, in moments of excitement the chorus often joins the soloists frequently singing in unison on the most important lines. Also, the chorus often sings "sotto voce" with staccato rhythm in moments of suspense or intrigue. This is true of the chorus "Sia rapita, ma in seguirci" in Act I.[8] This is a chorus that parallels the chorus "Zitti, zitti, moviamo a vendette" in Rigoletto, Act I. Both of these choruses are sung "sotto voce" with frequent staccato markings. Parallel in dramatic circumstances, both choruses are singing of intrigue. In Rigoletto the Duke's courtiers are in the process of capturing Gilda; in Ernani the bandits are discussing the possibility of carrying off Elvira for Ernani as they mysteriously describe the deed.

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[8] Ibid., p. 15.

The chorus is interesting in other ways. During several of the arias the chorus enters before the soloist returns to the "A" section of the melody. This happens in several of the main arias, "Ernani Involami" in Act I, "Lo vedremo, o veglio audace" in Act II and in all of the ensemble numbers for soloists except the trio in Act II.

Cadenzas usually occur near the end of the arias. Even one of the duets has a cadenza. (See Figure 10.) Elvira

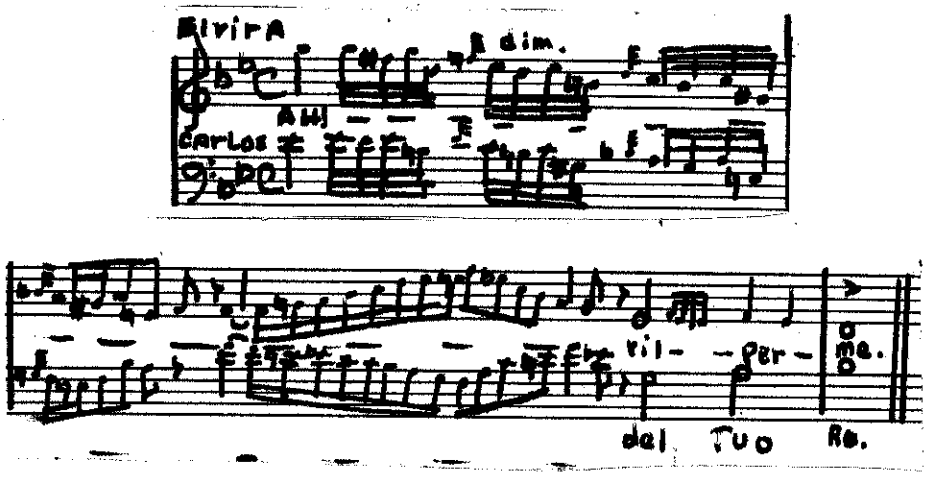


Fig. 10--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, p. 41, measures 7-10

has most of the florid and coloratura passages but some coloratura is assigned to the men. For example, Carlo has a cadenza in his aria "Lo vedremo, o veglio audace."

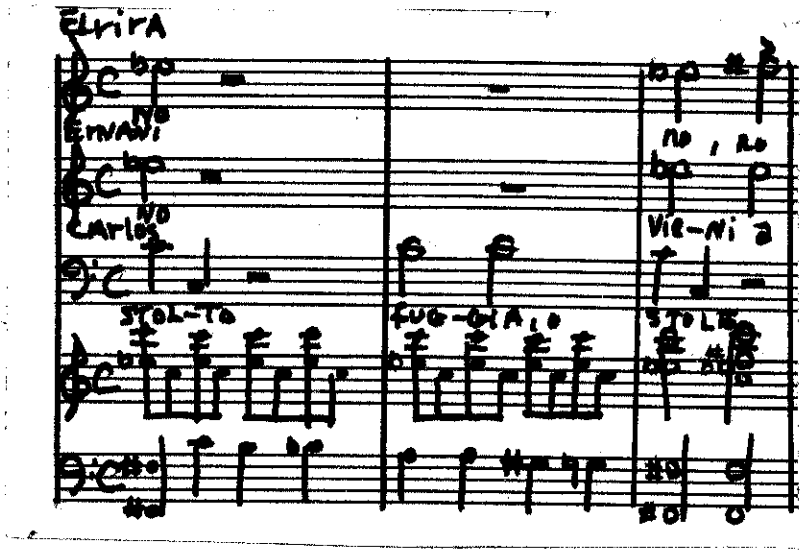
Harmonic Structure

Harmonically most of Ernani is very simple. This is especially true of the cadences which show the composer to

be preoccupied with repetitions of the tonic-dominant cadence.

Frequent, brief modulations are also very common to this score.[9] Usually, these modulations are built around the dominant-seventh chord which often serves as an "open sesame" for modulations into just about any key.

Not all of the harmonies are trite, however; there are several places in the score with very interesting harmonic structure. In the first trio (Act I) there is the use of the German sixth chord to emphasize the exchange of angry words between Carlo, Ernani and Elvira. (See Figure 11.)



[9]Verdi, op. cit., p. 217.

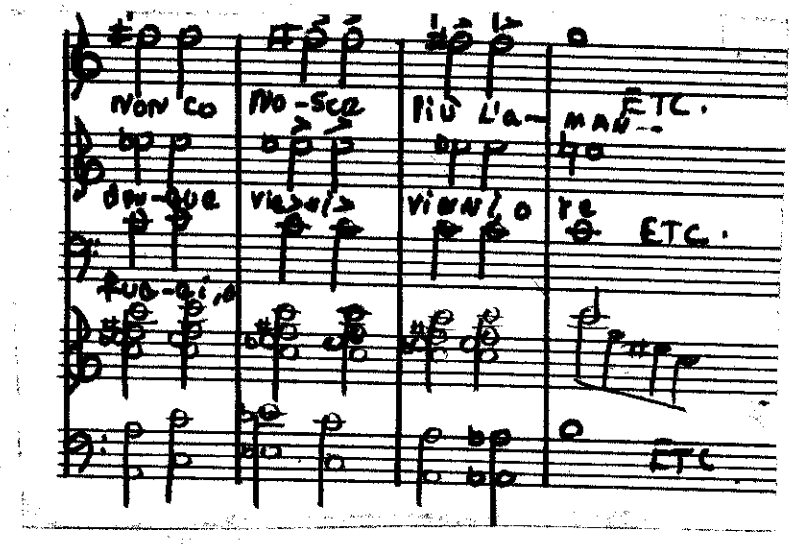


Fig. 11--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, pp. 49-50, meas. 16-19

The use of an increase in tempo, fortissimo and "tutti" in the orchestra further increases the dramatic impact of this phrase. The German sixth chord is also employed later in the score in Elvira's confused cry "Chi-mo smarrisci i sensi!" in the last act. (See Figure 12.) Verdi, in order

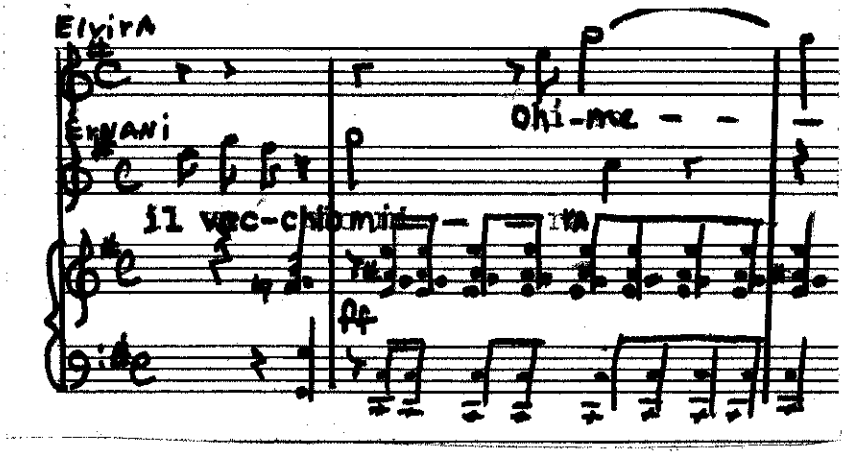


Fig. 12--Verdi, Ernani, Act IV, p. 210, measures 10-12

to create sadness uses descending harmonic and melodic motion and the lowered sixth and seventh steps of the scale.

The harmony for the chorus is usually very simple, probably because the chorus is employed in the ensembles and finales so often. The big ensembles are, without exception, simple and, at times, dull for their lack of variety in the harmony and rhythm.

It is interesting to note that most of the mixed choral work in the opera is for six voices, soprano, alto, two tenors and two basses. This use of four parts in the men's lines against only two in the women's may be because of the predominant role of the male chorus throughout the work. Ernani's bandits appear in several scenes for they are participants in much of the action. The women, however, have only one number alone and it is of no great importance (the women's chorus during the aria "Ernani involami" in Act I). Also, Verdi knew the effectiveness of men's voices singing robustly; vigor and robustness certainly characterize most of the choruses. However, except for the dynamics, these pieces are dull and repetitious for they have little rhythmic variety or harmonic interest.

The accompaniments, already mentioned under melodic structure, are, as a rule, simple and functional. Occasionally their triteness and weakness are evident, however. For example, when Silva learns from Ernani that Carlo is

his rival for Elvira he becomes enraged, but the music supporting him is a tripping, gay little motive that almost burlesques the idea. (See Figure 13.)

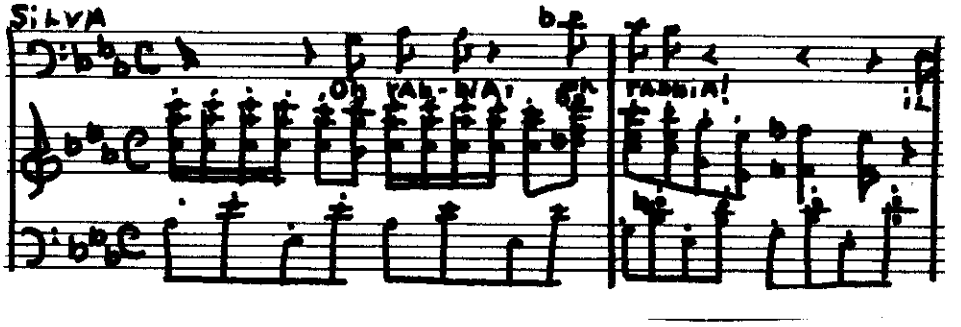


Fig. 13--Verdi, Ernani, Act II, p. 149, measures 11-12

Also, the music that announces the entrance of the Emperor in the third act is very inadequate. The stage directions indicate "enter six Electors, followed by pages bearing the crown, sceptre, and other imperial insignia on velvet cushions. Knights and Ladies surround the Emperor . . . ." This trite trumpet fanfare provided the announcement of this royal entrance. (See Figure 14.)

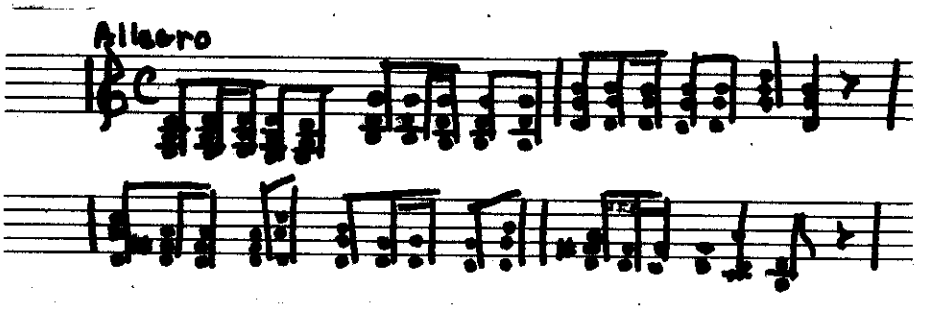


Fig. 14--Verdi, Ernani, Act III, p. 182, measures 4-7

Word-Painting.--Not all of the music, however, is as out of character as the trumpet fanfare in Act III. Verdi has achieved a considerable amount of word-painting in this opera. By writing music that describes what is going to be said, Verdi achieves something of the poetic in Ernani. These incidents are usually very simple ones and yet serve the purpose.

An excellent example of this is the little orchestral interjection that precedes Don Carlos' threat "ho i miei fidi" in the recitative to "Tu se' Ernani" in Act I. (See Figure 15.) This little interjection has sounded several times in the preceding lines but set apart here it becomes a very effective example of word-painting.

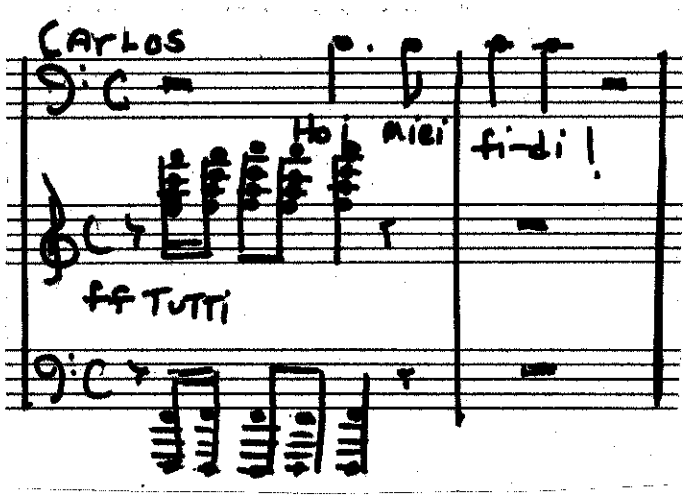


Fig. 15--Verdi, Ernani, Act I, p. 42, measures 13-14

Whole scenes are painted in much the same manner as individual lines. For example, the entrance of many of the

characters is suggested in the orchestra. Thus, the mood and general idea of many of the numbers are known before the actual singing begins. This is done in the prelude to Elvira's first act aria in the internal prelude with its staccato, repeated bass notes that suggest her stability and strength of character and also move at a pace that provides excellent music for her entrance onto the stage.[10] The somber hues of the chords describe the melancholy mood she is in.

The cantabile melody and funeral march rhythm of the prelude to Act III[11] are excellent examples of the music describing the scene. The use of somber, minor harmonies and long notes followed by short ones is musically describing the subterranean tomb wherein the action of this act is played. Also, the use of Bach-like part-writing with a typical suspension gives an effect of church music.

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[10] Ibid., p. 23.

[11] Ibid., p. 161.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This early work of Verdi deserves special attention, not only because of its historical value as one of the earliest works of the greatest Italian operatic composer, but for its musical merits as well. None of the early works contain the subtleties and refinements usually associated with his later operas but they do, nevertheless, contain an undeniable vigor and a compelling melodic emphasis.

The early operas of Verdi still achieve a certain appeal largely because of the impact of the individual numbers. Verdi's personality colors these operas giving them the impact of unity even when unity is lacking.

The molding of Verdi's musical genius to greater heights, especially evident in the greatest operas he wrote, Otello and Falstaff, does not eclipse the early works any more than the works of Gluck can completely eclipse the works of the late eighteenth-century operatic composers. Those who care to will investigate and find a storehouse of musical treasures and the very core from which this man's genius grew. The rhythmic patterns, melodic germs and even the main themes of most of these works to come can be heard

in his first few operas. Rigoletto is suggested in the chorus "Sia rapita, ma in seguirco" in Act I; Traviata is suggested in the sad prelude to Act III. In fact, the music throughout contains many characteristics that were used by Verdi throughout his career: the use of dotted rhythms, brief and simple modulations, melodic lines of a wide compass and assignment of melodic emphasis to the orchestra when the voices are not performing.

The melodies of these early works, though often trite, are almost overwhelmingly direct. If Verdi had a musical thought he did not disguise it in a web of orchestral complexities. The result was an almost frank utterance and melodic purity which the composer retained throughout his career. Fortunately, however, his orchestral tools were improved. His early works often sound as if they had been orchestrated for an organ grinder. These works have a great value simply in the fact that they pointed the way for the composer's musical peak reached in Otello and Falstaff. In addition, they are amiable works in their own right.

One wishes that countries other than Italy would support Ernani and the other early works of Verdi. Verdi became a great musical giant largely out of the skill and artistry learned from the embryo provided by these early works.

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