



Les opéras de Verdi : Éléments d'un langage musico-dramatique. By Steven Huebner. Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2017. 363pp. ISBN 978-2-7606-3302-5.

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The analysis of Giuseppe Verdi's music has engaged musicologists for some forty years. During this time, considerable efforts were made to elucidate how Verdi, responding to changing aesthetic and cultural conditions, shaped poetic, musical, and dramatic structures to create powerful theatrical works. Despite there being a remarkable number of studies on this topic, Steven Huebner's *Les opéras de Verdi* is the first single monograph to discuss these issues in a systematic fashion. The book

provides a comprehensive overview of the debates concerning different analytical strategies from the past few decades, and offers insights on how these strategies can be implemented. Huebner also returns to in-depth close readings of Verdi's music, elucidating cultural and contextual approaches to his operas and the critical discourses surrounding them. In this respect, this volume is complementary to Gilles De Van's influential *Verdi, un théâtre en musique*.¹ Situating the development of Verdi's operatic output (and, consequently, the technical and stylistic characteristics of his music) within the broader canvas of nineteenth-century European aesthetics of drama, De Van approaches Verdi's theatre from the outside. Huebner, in contrast, proceeds from the inside out, focusing on the inner rules of the composer's dramaturgical language.

The book is the outgrowth of a series of four lectures, and maintains the original subdivision in four sections. The first one focuses on the versification of opera libretti, the ways in which Verdi sets to music different types of verses, and the dramatic effects he achieves by using them. Huebner provides an overview of the basic rules of Italian metrics and the rationale behind the distinction between *versi lirici* ("lyrical verses") and *versi sciolti* ("blank verses") in opera librettos. He then considers in detail the most common types of poetic meters employed by Verdi's librettists and



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1. Gilles de Van, *Verdi: un théâtre en musique* (Paris: Fayard, 1992); *Verdi's Theater: Creating Drama Through Music*, trans. Gilda Roberts (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

how different patterns of accents were set to music. The final section of this chapter is dedicated to Arrigo Boito's metric innovations and their contribution to Verdi's more unfettered attitude towards text setting. Huebner consistently accompanies his examples with insightful observations on how Verdi's choices aim to define a character or a dramatic situation.

The second chapter of the book is dedicated to the different styles of vocal writing in Verdi's operas. Taking a cue from Abramo Basevi's (admittedly vague) terminology in his essay on the composer (*recitative, parlante, arioso*, etc.), Huebner explores several commonly used stylistic categories, their combination, and hybridization.² An important focus of this chapter is on those fluid stylistic features that Verdi applied to a variety of formal contexts. Huebner, for instance, differentiates between "aria" as a formal category (a well-defined lyrical section of a set piece) and "aria style" passages (lyrical episodes that occur outside the lyrical sections of a closed number), and proposes that such a distinction helps us to understand Verdi's stylistic development away from clear-cut formal sections and towards a more flexible treatment of melody (pp. 95-96).

In the third chapter, Huebner investigates the variety of ways in which Verdi shaped and articulated his melodies. His approach here is both historical and analytical: Huebner exposes how critics and pedagogues of Verdi's time discussed melodic writing and then proposes his own close reading of a number of Verdi's melodies. He also comments and expands on several classic studies by such scholars as Friedrich Lippmann, Scott Balthazar, and Joseph Kerman. A major contribution of this chapter is Huebner's discussion of the interactions between hierarchically organized structural melodic levels, particularly between what he calls "anapestic phrases" (smaller but flexible syntactic units organized according to the tripartite model *aab*, 188 ff.) and the "lyrical prototype" (the larger organization of phrases into periodic structures). According to Huebner, Verdi's original combination of retrospective and innovative elements is a result of these interactions, and emerges as a crucial marker of the composer's style throughout his entire career (p. 227).

Finally, Huebner addresses the question of the multi-movement organization of operatic numbers. Just like in the second section, Huebner offers an extensive overview of the historical use of technical terms associated with the sections of a set piece (*cavatina, cabaletta, tempo d'attacco*, etc.). He then considers the shape and dramatic function of the most common numbers from Verdi's operas (duets, arias, introduzioni, finali, and so on). The last section of the chapter discusses scholarly debates over Verdi's debt to these formal structures in his late operas. For Huebner, in Verdi's late output traditional paradigm are to be understood more as protean materials underpinning the development of *ad hoc* formal articulations (p. 324), but remain foundational in the conception of an eminently lyrical dramaturgy: i.e. a dramaturgy that is conceived upon, manipulates, and ultimately enhances the expressive power of the human voice through melody.

2. Abramo Basevi, *Studio sulle opere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Florence: Tofani, 1859); *The Operas of Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. by Stefano Castelvechi, trans. by Edward Schneider and Stefano Castelvechi (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

The book constitutes a remarkable compendium on several important analytical issues: it is clear, thorough, and grounded in many detailed and compelling readings of Verdi's music. It will likely become an essential pedagogical tool in French-speaking classrooms, and one hopes that an English translation will follow for the benefit of students in English-speaking universities. Yet, for a study that seeks to explore systematically the composer's musical language (as suggested by the back cover), something important is missing. There is very little about how differently Verdi's French operas worked from the Italian ones, or how the composer's experience with French genres contributed to the development of his style. While a vast literature on the subject exists, the aim of the book as a point of entry into the world of Verdian analysis makes the absence of this topic regrettable. It is also unfortunate that some recent analytical discussions have not found their way into it, such as William Rothstein's study on meter in Verdi's mid-century operas.³

These limitations notwithstanding, with this publication Huebner provides a welcome addition to Verdi scholarship: it will serve well not only seasoned Verdi scholars, who might find the many details of Huebner's analyses intriguing, but will also be useful to teachers who wish to consolidate their students' understanding of the workings of Verdi's Italian operas.

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3. William Rothstein, "Metrical Theory and Verdi's Midcentury Operas," *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* 16, no. 2 (2011), 93-111.