

Rezensionen – Reviews – Recensioni

Carteggio Verdi-Waldmann (1873-1900), a cura di Marco BEGHELLI e Nicola BADOLATO, Parma, Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 2014 [dicembre 2015], XII + 471 pp.

The *Edizione critica dell'epistolario verdiano* continues with this fine volume dedicated to the correspondence between the composer and one of his most celebrated later singers, Maria Waldmann. During her very brief career, she sang Amneris in the European premiere of *Aida*, and then created the mezzo part in the *Messa da Requiem*. She retired soon after this, marrying into the aristocracy in her early thirties; but she remained a close friend of Verdi and his wife throughout the rest of their lives. It is worth stressing that this is not a volume in which to seek out unpublished letters by Verdi; his side of this *epistolario* has, for the most part, long been available. But the other side of the correspondence, together with the edition's huge bibliographic armature, and its numerous notes and appendices, make the volume nevertheless of great scholarly importance, often clarifying matters unclear when looked at solely from the composer's point of view.

Collected, multi-author correspondence such as this also makes abundantly clear the sheer messiness of biographical data, warning us that to take anyone's private correspondence as "evidence" is always a perilous act of faith. A good example comes at the very end of the volume. Verdi's last letter to Waldmann, by then his "Carissima Duchessa", is dated "Milano 22 Dicem. 1900" and so is very near the final Verdian curtain. It carries a common lament from the aging composer. Virtually the entire content of the letter apart from the usual opening and closing salutations is as follows: "In quanto a me non saprei cosa dirvi: non sono ammalato, ma la vita e le forze diminuiscono di giorno in giorno. Tutto mi affatica! È naturale..." (362) To this, the editors add a footnote which reports a very similar letter, if anything more lamentational still, written some six months earlier by the composer to Teresa Stolz: "Oh! la vita di un vecchio è ben infelice! Anche non con malattie di carattere, la vita pesa e si sente che la vitalità e le forze diminuiscono un giorno più dell'altro" (363, n. 3). The word-choice and sentiments are suspiciously identical, but partly for this reason the letters might seem to supply us with a vivid picture of the composer's private mood in these last years. But then what are we to make of a letter

dated just two days earlier than Verdi's to Waldmann, this time from Teresa Stolz to Waldmann (20 December 1900) and printed in one of this edition's Appendices?

Il nostro caro Maestro sta bene, malgrado i suoi 87 anni, egli gode di buon appetito, dorme bene, esce di sovente in Carozza [sic!], qualche poco cammina, si lagna delle Gambe, egli vorrebbe [sic!] fare delle lunghe passeggiate, ma le forze alle gambe gli mancano!! Del resto è di buon umore, ama molto la Compagnia, e in casa sua ogni sera si riuniscono molti dei suoi intimi Amici. (397)

Can we, should we, attempt to adjudicate between such sharply different accounts? In one sense, of course, they could both be "psychologically true": Verdi was adopting his usual, hyper-pessimistic late epistolary manner; while Stolz – perhaps interestingly in the circumstances, given her complicated past life with the composer – was actively developing the more traditional view of the "genial" old man who dutifully smiles out at us from those last photographs. We might indeed conclude that both letters are in essence sincere, if one understands that slippery adjective to mean, in this context, something as complicated as "true to the letter-writer's perception of what kind of contract existed between him/her and her/his interlocutor of the moment". However, for the purposes of narrative biography such equivocation between different accounts will not always be possible, still less stylistically desirable: we will have to make a choice, and this eclectic collection of letters will sound the necessary warning bell whenever we do so.

By no means only for that last reason, this collection is a marvellous addition to the Verdi literature. Within its notes are buried huge swathes of valuable detective work and bibliographic endeavour. Within its introductory material we can find a thorough account of Waldmann's career as well as what is surely the most accurate and sensitive account of her part in the complicated genesis of *Aida*, the opera that initiated her friendship with Verdi (in the first letter between them, the composer, with a fine show of gallantry – "eccomi a Voi mia carissima e graziosissima [sic!] Maria" (90) – asks her to take part in the premiere of the *Messa da Requiem*). And among the letters themselves we have fascinating examples of how much sheer flattery and antique verbosity (in Waldmann's case perhaps aided by a charmingly deployed eccentricity of Italian) were needed to keep a famous composer "on message".

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