

Massimo ZICARI, *Verdi in Victorian London*, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers 2016, viii + 348 p.

Joseph Bennett, writing in the *Spectator* following Verdi's death in 1901, asked rhetorically whether "there is anything quite comparable to [...] this change from being the idol of the mob to the admired of the elect". Massimo Zicari's chronicle of this evolution in the reception of Verdi's music in London focuses on four leading periodicals and newspapers, *The Athenaeum*, *The Musical World*, *The Times* and the *Musical Times*. The book proceeds chronologically through the main premieres of Verdi's operas, also taking in the significant episodes of the *Inno delle nazioni* in 1862 and the *Messa di Requiem* in 1875. The reader is presented at times with too much extraneous detail and confusing narrative about the progress of each operatic season (including a chapter unpromisingly titled 'Uneventful Years'), but Zicari's analysis of the main themes in the English reception of Verdi's music is clear and compelling.

Zicari isolates several key tropes which characterised negative criticism of Verdi's compositional style from the premiere of *Ernani* in 1845 until the 1870s. The conservatism of critics such as Henry Fothergill Chorley of *The Athenaeum* and James William Davison at the *Musical World* and *The Times*, was founded on a view of the bel canto tradition in which 'melodiousness' was defined in terms set in the era of Paisiello and Cimarosa, developed faithfully by Rossini, only to be neglected by Bellini and Donizetti in a search for 'dramatization'. For Chorley and his ilk Verdi's music represented a nadir for the 'Land of Song' by this abandonment of melody and preference for heightened drama and emotional expression, a propensity to choruses in unison and above all, bombast and "noise".

Another fundamental line of argument among these conservative critics was that the success of Verdi's operas with the public was due only to the qualities of the performances, and particularly the star singers, in spite of the weaknesses inherent in the libretti and music. This was particularly the case with the opera which forms the most central and most substantial case study in the book, *La traviata*, in which Marietta Piccolomini sang Violetta and ignited a mania among theatre audiences. Here Zicari affords more space to the social and urban context of the reception of the adaptation of Dumas' *La dame aux camélias* in a city which could claim to rival Paris as a cultural metropolis, but also one exhibiting a high and visible level of prostitution. Zicari also covers the mechanics of the censorship of opera in mid-Victorian England, through which, as in France and Italy for

example, the operatic treatment of morally dubious subjects could be presented more frankly than prose drama because the audience was thought to be drawn more by the music than the libretto.

The latter part of the book deals with the transformation in critical responses to Verdi's later operas following the premiere of the first Wagner opera in London, *L'olandese dannato* (*Der fliegende Holländer* in an Italian version), in 1870, and the reaction to Wagner's philosophical ideas. This period coincided with a widening of the outlook of music criticism as a new generation, led by Joseph Bennett, succeeded the conservatism of Chorley and Davison. More positive critical responses to Verdi's operas were divided about the influence of the 'German school' but Meyerbeer was often acknowledged as a more important model than Wagner. The concept of the 'palmy days' of Italian opera pervaded the writings of progressive critics. With *Otello* and *Falstaff* it was possible to discern a camp between Wagnerites and 'palmy' nostalgists who thought Verdi "combines at the period of his ripe maturity the intellectuality of the Teuton with the graceful charm of the Italian genius".

The title of Zicari's monograph, *Verdi in Victorian London*, suggests a broader canvas than the reception of theatrical premieres in the music of the city. It opens up questions about the transmission of Verdi's music which would help enlighten one of Zicari's central questions about the gulf between the early negative critical reception and the popular success of his operas. He quotes one of the most patronising reviews of *Rigoletto*, in *The Times*, that 'La donna è mobile' had supplied the barrel organs with a tune "which is retained as soon as it is heard", proving popular (ironically) "with all the ladies". More attention to different modes of transmission and consumption, including albums and transcriptions, would enrich the context for the reception among music periodicals.

In his conclusion, Zicari underlines the offensive nature of many of the early attacks on Verdi's compositional skill and style. He suggests such invective would be unacceptable today. Yet we live in an age when British music criticism is often highly parochial and insulting, notable *causes célèbres* being the rude and patronising reception of Mark Anthony Turnage's latest opera in 2018, or the bullying and fat-shaming of female singers. We might make a case that the level of music criticism in the era of social media falls beneath even the values of early Victorian London.

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