

'Che il pubblico non venga defraudato degli spettacoli ad esso promessi'

The Venetian Premiere of *La traviata* and Austria's Imperial Administration in 1853*

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Historical myth (rather than scholarship) has it that the Austrians did everything in their power to make lovers of opera in the Habsburgs' Italian provinces feel miserable, and that works by Giuseppe Verdi in particular were viewed with a persistent deal of suspicion. An image of ruthless censors, armed officers in the stalls and police spies in the corridors comes to mind.¹ In the case of opera in Habsburg Venice, this idea was fostered by a tradition of politically motivated historiography that tended to justify Italians' struggle for independence with the alleged despotism of Austrian rule in the region, closely linked to the image of the Empire as a 'prison of nationalities'.² That many of Italy's greatest opera houses were built, and

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¹ See for instance Giovanni GAVAZZENI, in ID., Armando TORNO, Carlo VITALI, *O mia patria. Storia musicale del Risorgimento, tra inni, eroi e melodrammi* (Milan: Dalai 2011), 60: «I palchi della Scala [...] erano occupati dalla soldataglia e dagli austriacanti». For a recent version of Verdi's role in this tale see Angelo S. SABATINI, "Il contributo di Verdi alla formazione del mito del Risorgimento", in *Giuseppe Verdi e il Risorgimento*, ed. Ester CAPUZZO, Antonio CASU, Angelo SABATINI (Soverelli Mannelli: Rubbettino 2014), 11-24. For a critical assessment see Fabrizio DELLA SETA, "Opera e Risorgimento: si può dire ancora qualcosa?", *verdiperspektiven*, 2 (2017), 81-106. Roger PARKER, "Verdi politico: a wounded cliché regroups", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 17/4 (2012), 427-436. Axel KÖRNER, "Oper, Politik und nationale Bewegung. Mythen um das Werk Giuseppe Verdis", in *Kunst, Politik und Gesellschaft in Europa seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hannes SIEGRIST and Thomas HÖPEL (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2017), 99-110.

² This view first found polemical expression in the accounts of Augusto Sandonà and G.M. Trevelyan, but its legacy still resonates in recent work. See for instance Spencer DI SCALA, *Italy: From Revolution to Republic, 1700 to the Present* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 1995), 56. Also Paul GINSBORG, *Daniele Manin and the Venetian Revolution of 1848-49* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979), 2. For a more balanced view see Marino BERENGO, "Le origini del Lombardo-Veneto", *Rivista storica italiana*, 83 (1971), 524-544; Marco MERIGGI, *Il regno lombardo-veneto* (Turin: UTET