

## *Risorgimento Fantasies*

### THE SOCIETY OF TRANSCENDENTAL-ROMANTICS

In 1816 and 1817 two competitions were announced in Milan within a little more than a year of each other. One was a serious and official undertaking: the royal theaters of Milan sponsored a contest for a new libretto, promising that the winning entry would be set to music by a composer chosen by theater officials, and given a première at the Teatro alla Scala. No record survives of the winner—it is likely that none was ever declared—but one of the contenders was Giovanni Gherardini's *Avviso ai giudici*, a drama of legal persecution and social injustice set after the French Revolution that eventually became the basis for Rossini's *La gazza ladra*. The competition does not seem to have had the desired rejuvenating effect. On reading the submissions, judge Vincenzo Monti came to the realization that Italian dramatic poetry was in crisis. In a letter to one of his fellow judges, Monti declared that it would take a miracle to overcome the illogical libretti and the musical pretensions that had reduced opera to nothing more than “a monstrous coagulation of words without meaning.”<sup>1</sup>

A little over a year later, the Milan-based journal of fashion and culture, the *Corriere delle dame*, announced a competition of its own. Held under the auspices of the impressive-sounding but entirely imaginary “Accademia de' Romantici Transcendentali,” this contest advertised that it would identify and reward the best romantic tragedy of the moment.<sup>2</sup> The guidelines for prospective applicants fill more than a page of dense type and amount to a virtual catalogue of romantic affectations. The winning tragedy must denigrate Italy and Italians as much as possible, the list begins, and therefore all the villains of the piece must be Italian. Competing playwrights are advised

to have thirty or forty characters die in full view on the stage, to extend the action over “no less than five years, no more than fifty,” and to place one scene in Italy and the next in Babylon, or perhaps to divide the action between Mecca and Siberia.

The tongue-in-cheek recommendations go on and on, but all of them engage in this jesting way with the classical unities and with related aesthetic conventions that had long governed the narrative modes of both spoken drama and opera libretti. In a light-hearted vein, the editors of the *Corriere* were fighting back against the encroachment of romantic aesthetics that was beginning to infiltrate Italy from the north, a movement whose new currency was trumpeted most loudly by Madame de Staël’s article “On the Manner and the Usefulness of Translations,” which had appeared in Italian translation in the first issue of the *Biblioteca italiana* in 1816. In the midst of a generally disparaging evaluation of the current state of Italian literary production, she called for the translation of Shakespeare, Schiller, and other northern authors as the best antidote for Italian backwardness.<sup>3</sup> The sentence about “denigrating Italians” in the *Corriere*’s contest is a clear swipe at Mme. de Staël, and the sarcastic calls for multiple deaths and action that veers wildly across time and space were indirect responses to the dramatic values promoted in her article and represented by the authors she championed.

Mme. de Staël felt no more positive than Monti about the operatic dimension of Italian culture and even went so far as to blame opera for the sad state of the nation’s literary tradition. Advocating the translation of a drama by Chateaubriand into Italian, she paused to make a distinction between the sheer quality of Italian music and the frivolity of the social settings in which it is heard:

I do not doubt that *Athalie* would be appreciated in Milanese theaters, especially if the choruses were accompanied by wonderful Italian music. But they say that in Italy people go to the theater not to listen but to meet and chat with their dearest friends in the boxes. And I will conclude from this that sitting for five hours every evening listening to what passes for words in Italian opera must dull the intellect of the nation, for want of exercise.<sup>4</sup>

With this dismissal of operagoing as both tranquilizing and distracting, Mme. de Staël anticipated—and perhaps also provided the script for—the poet Giacomo Leopardi, who a few years later in 1824 would offer his own scathing evaluation of opera and its effects on Italian society. Leopardi lamented that Italians knew little of the free exchange of opinion

or of close interpersonal bonds beyond the family, compared to other European nations:

Many reasons conspire to deprive Italy of society, not all of which I can enumerate here. The climate, which predisposes Italians to spend most of each day in the open air, and encourages long walks and things like that, the vivacity of the Italian character, which causes citizens to prefer the pleasures of live performance [*spettacoli*] and other delights of the senses to those of the spirit, and that pushes them to pure entertainment divorced from any effort of the soul, as well as to negligence and indolence. . . . There can be no doubt that the *passaggio* [the public evening walk], the *spettacoli*, and the rituals of the church have nothing at all to do with that type of society that other nations possess. Today the *passaggio*, the theater, and the church are the principal venues for what little society Italy does possess, and indeed they constitute its entirety . . . since Italians do not like domestic life, nor do they take pleasure in or excel at conversation. So instead they stroll, they go to the theater and other entertainments, to Mass and to sermons, and to sacred and secular feasts.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas Mme. de Staël imagined Italian audiences lulled into a stupor by five-hour stretches of pretty music, Leopardi characterizes operagoing as a herd activity like promenading through the piazza before dinner or gawking at a religious procession, all activities that militate against independent thought and debate.

Reading Monti, Mme. de Staël, or Leopardi, one might conclude that opera was an entirely negative force in early-nineteenth-century Italy. All agree on the low literary quality of the libretti, and the last two resoundingly blame operatic culture for the deficiencies they observe in civil society and public engagement. Around 1816 this was no trivial matter: the cities and regions of Italy were grappling with the upheavals wrought by the decade-long occupation of much of the peninsula by Napoleonic forces and the political reorganizations imposed by the Congress of Vienna. After 1815 Milan and Venice were subsumed into the Habsburg Kingdom of Lombardy-Veneto, ruled by viceroys appointed by Vienna; Naples and Sicily were returned to the control of the Bourbon king Ferdinand who had governed the city for a turbulent half century before the advent of French rule in 1806; Bologna and its environs became part of the Papal States with Rome; and cities such as Florence reclaimed their status as autonomous duchies. Linguistically, the peninsula

remained at least as diverse—a mosaic of regional dialects—so that the language sung on the opera stage would have been one of the few occasions on which audiences scattered across the peninsula enjoyed the same spectacle in the same standard Italian. Enmeshed in such tumultuous change, some among the literati saw an opportunity to reposition Italy in relation to Europe and to restore Italian letters to the widespread renown of the age of Dante or Michelangelo. A scant few among those were also wondering what steps they might take to gain independence from foreign rule or to knit the peninsula's regions into a single entity; but for most the idea of a unified and independent Italy was no more than a shadow, if even that.

From this perspective, the institution of opera would not seem a promising place to begin inquiry into the process of “making Italy” that stretched from 1815 through the unification of the Italian peninsula in 1861. Opera figured in these polemical essays because it was both the central form of entertainment for educated Italians and an important trope in the lively and anxious discourse about the place of Italian culture in a European context. Long before Verdi and the tales of spontaneous patriotic outpouring that rose up around some of his works, opera was heralded as something that Italians did better than anyone else in Europe, and therefore as a medium for projecting Italian character into the world. The primacy of Italian operatic style was rooted in the delivery of cantilena, the smooth, unbroken singing of a melodic line; and such melodies were thought to arise naturally from the inherent musicality of the language: “remarkable for its smoothness and the facility with which it enters into musical composition,” as Italian was described in one eighteenth-century geographical compendium.<sup>6</sup> Rossini champion Giuseppe Carpani recast this conviction in more oppositional and more nationalistic terms in the pages of the *Biblioteca italiana* in 1818: “We see two genres of music emerge and contend on the battlefield: the ancient and regular Italian style based on song and melody, and the Romantic German style, poor in cantilena and rich in harmony, full, erudite, capricious.”<sup>7</sup> As we shall see in chapter 2, such discourse could be just as debilitating as the conversation about how opera encouraged passivity and dullness of mind. The association between pure, vocally conceived melody and *italianità* could become a prison, with writers on opera circling endlessly around the same narrow lexicon of approved notions, each new work evaluated in relation to a mythical ideal of pure Neapolitan melody.

Yet going to the opera could also feel like the very opposite of imprisonment. In his pseudodiary from 1817, *Rome, Naples, and Florence*, the always

effervescent Stendhal tells of being a frequent guest in the box of Ludovico di Breme at La Scala, amid a distinguished company that included Mme. de Staël's Italian translator Pietro Borsieri, philosopher Ermes Visconti, politician and patriot Federico Confalonieri, and revolutionary poet Silvio Pellico. "One never saw women," Stendhal admits; but for female company one could escape to the loge of Nina Viganò, singer and daughter of the choreographer Salvatore. Stendhal's description of the people he met in di Breme's box at La Scala is both energetic and intellectually intense: the fragments of conversation he relays, in fact, mostly concern Mme. de Staël's controversial article on translation, forming a sort of viva voce counterpart to the many weighty responses to that essay that were published in the pages of the *Biblioteca italiana*, *Il conciliatore*, and in freestanding pamphlets. It is a commonplace that the most important function of opera in the early nineteenth century was as a place of assembly, one of the few venues where large groups could freely gather, mingle, and react to what they saw and heard. But reading Stendhal against Leopardi, one could add that opera houses and the nearby cafés in which performances were dissected the next day were a crucial component of Italy's emerging public sphere, one that was invisible to the reclusive Leopardi.

A striking absence in Stendhal's bright picture of operatic sociability is any mention of music or musicians. He tells us that di Breme was generous enough to welcome Stendhal into his loge as a guest almost every night except Fridays, when the theater was dark; but he never mentions what operas they saw, and they never seem to encounter Rossini or any other musician. When Rossini does make an appearance a few pages earlier in Stendhal's idiosyncratic diary, it is almost in the guise of a jester, or perhaps a caricature of Italian charm and desire: at the Caffè dell'Accademia across from La Scala, the composer is overheard boasting about his conquest of a (married?) countess.<sup>8</sup> The format of *Rome, Naples, and Florence* as combination diary and travelogue makes the juxtaposition seem accidental; but the strict separation of the actual, practical business of making music from matters of the mind is also typical of the book, perhaps even integral to its conception.

#### IN SEARCH OF POLITICAL MUSIC

Two contests—one genuine, the other satirical, devised entirely to amuse the readership of a fashionable journal. Two manifestos—one penned by a woman of letters of impeccable cosmopolitan credentials, the other by a

sheltered Italian from Le Marche. And then the exuberant testimony of Stendhal, an essential voice in operatic history, despite his chronic fallibility. This eclectic sampling puts before us some of the possible contemporary stances about how opera might connect to the public sphere, to political feeling and political thought. At the same time, the project of reading the *Corriere delle dame* in satirical mode alongside the letters of Vincenzo Monti, or juxtaposing the reclusive Leopardi with Stendhal's giddy prose makes clear one of the challenges of narrating the operatic history of early-nineteenth-century Italy, archived as it is in documentary material that is variously indirect, satirical, heavily censored (or self-censored), and oblique.

From our current vantage point it might seem that the historian's task was once much simpler. After the clouds of fascist-era historiography had cleared and before the suspicious mindset and magpie impulses of New Historicism hit musicology, it seemed possible to link specific operas and operatic styles to political events in a relatively straightforward way: one that relied on a distinction—and implicit interdependence—between “text” and “context.” The same logic that allowed the linking of Mozart to the Enlightenment, or Beethoven to Napoleon, could authorize the pairing of Verdi “and” the Risorgimento, a dyad based more on contemporaneity and contiguity than on any demonstrable indications that Verdi's operas had affected—or reflected—the thought or action of Italy's period of nation-building.<sup>9</sup> The few instances of more concrete political relevance were worked very hard, none more so than the notorious case of “Va pensiero.”

The story went that, inspired by the beauty of the tune and its words voicing the lament of an enslaved people far from their homeland, the audience at the 1842 première of Verdi's *Nabucco* at the Teatro alla Scala spontaneously insisted that the chorus be repeated, defying a police ban on encores. The story of that encore launched a thousand hermeneutic ships before being discredited in 1988 by Roger Parker. When Parker turned to the tome in which the anecdote was first recounted, Franco Abbiati's 1959 Verdi biography, he found that the author had more or less invented the passage, cobbling together bits from two different reviews to attribute to “Va pensiero” an encore that had actually been demanded for another chorus, the Hebrew prayer “Immenso Jeovha.”<sup>10</sup> The purported encore was not the only basis for connecting Verdi's early operas to popular patriotic feeling; but it was one of the few instances that pointed toward a concrete audience response rather than the assumed import of words or music. Writing in 1981, David Kimbell took the interpretive leap of faith that is almost inevitable in “Risorgimento”

interpretations of the early operas: “*Nabucco* established Verdi in the front rank of Italian composers because in it he showed that his peculiar brand of vehemence and melancholy was ideally matched to expressing the dilemma of contemporary Italy in operatic terms.”<sup>11</sup> Philip Gossett, too, seemed to be forcing open a hermeneutic window when he heard what he perceived as a mismatch between words and music in “Immenso Jeovha” as a signal of subversive intent that audiences would have understood.<sup>12</sup> Journalist Alexander Stille exemplified the wide popular uptake of these theories in his 2007 review-essay in the *New Republic*, culminating with those familiar “crowds of patriots” who shouted “Viva Verdi!”: “Since political speech was carefully monitored by the powers that controlled most of Italy . . . the cultural expression of italianità became a way of building a political identity while avoiding censorship. The operas of Verdi were commonly regarded as allegories of unification and patriotism.”<sup>13</sup>

Probably the most common strategy in connecting Italian opera to politics has been based on morphologies—between the subaltern groups depicted in the early operas of Verdi and the oppression of northern Italians under Austria, but also between musical forms and states of mind. For example, the energy released in the fast concluding section (or “cabaletta”) of the standard two-part “double” aria has been heard as a correlate to—and sometimes as a trigger for—the surge of aggression needed to overcome Habsburg domination.<sup>14</sup> Such interpretations falter partly because the similarities of design that seem so obvious to listeners today may not have been perceptible to audiences and writers in the 1830s and 1840s, who were less conditioned to see their own experiences in terms of allegory or abstract structures. To put this another way, the fact that it is *possible* to observe structural similarities between operatic plots or music and contemporary life does nothing to guarantee a relationship of *influence*—or even meaningful connection—between artworks and the offstage world.

This is where *Waiting for Verdi* begins: with the moment when historians acknowledged that listeners from the 1840s did not experience Verdi’s operas in terms of analogies between the slaves in *Nabucco*—or the crusaders in *I Lombardi*, or the Aquileians in *Attila*—and northern Italians under Austrian control, nor turn to them at all for messages about politics or everyday life. Keeping these cold, hard facts firmly in view, it is still difficult to dispel completely the sense that Verdi’s operas communicated something new and powerful to Italian listeners. The project of this book is to trust that intuition and to pursue it; to add to the documentary record or, more

precisely, to access a new archive of historical listening to this music. I approach that challenging task partly by reading a wider range of sources, including texts on aesthetics, literature, and sometimes also science, economics, or anthropology, that were often penned by the same authors who shaped opinion about Verdi and about opera more generally in the journals of the period.

A more fundamental innovation of *Waiting for Verdi* is my decision to push back the start date of the inquiry long before Verdi's *Nabucco*. Not only has much of the reception history of Verdi's early period already been placed under the microscope, but the journalistic and literary discourses of that period are opaque and rigid, chilled by awareness of censorship but also by fatigue or overfamiliarity with assumptions about style and aesthetics that had ossified decades earlier. By beginning from the moment of Rossini's first successes in Naples and Milan around 1815, I aim to explore what opera meant to early-nineteenth-century audiences, what kinds of edification and emotion they believed theatrical experience could and should provide, and how they ranked various forms of mimesis and musical expression. To begin before Verdi also forces a generative reconception of how opera communicates with and about the surrounding world. I want to argue that the social commentary embedded in *La gazza ladra*'s story of a servant unjustly accused of theft, or in the transactions between shipbuilders and Venetian Doge in Donizetti's *Marino Faliero*, opened up new ways for Italians to think about the role of music in shaping their reality, less obvious but perhaps even more powerful than the binaristic struggles that anchored Verdi's early works. These operas and others like them jolted audiences into more active and sympathetic modes of attention in the theater, fostering an engagement that, I argue, was a precondition for a more activist stance outside of the theater. The book ends by returning to Verdi in Milan in the 1840s, to think about how critics and amateurs responded to opera at a time when political discourse was becoming more open and more articulate about unification and about casting off Austrian domination. Just before and during the revolutions of 1848 we begin to see the first instances of operatic music being used in the ways that become common by 1870 or 1880—as part of scripted political demonstrations, as the basis for popular songs and satirical sketches lampooning political leaders.

If differences of opinion about how to hear the evidence of Verdi's early operas and how to read the documentary record have at times divided the community of Verdi scholars, the root of the problem may be

a lack of clarity about what makes music “political,” or when a musical utterance might be considered to wield political force. This is a question that admits a range of approaches, each with ethical as well as methodological ramifications. Perhaps the lowest threshold, and the easiest to demonstrate, relies on assessing the opinions of composer or librettist about some political situation. By this measure Verdi scores highly, since in his letters of the period he several times expresses support for the 1848 revolutions and for a united, independent Italy. But these scattered statements hardly constitute a coherent political attitude and are in any case irrelevant to any impact the music may or may not have had. More importantly, even music that was commissioned or designed for an explicitly political occasion cannot be assumed to have reliably, completely, or consistently *communicated* whatever its political intentions might have been to its audience.<sup>15</sup> For music to be considered as “political,” it should be possible to demonstrate that it has affected some aspect of concrete reality: the experience of hearing the music must have changed events in some fundamental way for listeners. In *Waiting for Verdi* I adopt a reception-based understanding of political music, ultimately referring back to what we can know of the reactions of contemporary listeners and to how those reactions might have been taken up into the collective political imagination.

This may give the impression that the moments that matter most are performances that provoked riots or sparked revolutions—situations that are both extremely rare and often rather random in their choice of musical cue. Famously, a duet from Auber’s *La muette de Portici* was used as a signal to set off a rebellion in Brussels in 1830.<sup>16</sup> And a chorus from Verdi’s *Ernani* was adapted a number of times in 1846–47 to celebrate the new, more progressive pope, and by extension the new freedoms he was expected to introduce. Occasions like these suggest that music had real, sometimes even flamboyant, impact on political life; but the music and the ideas and emotions connected with it tend to be incidental in these situations, usually selected and “weaponized” because of some convenient association between the words and the political cause.

A more commonplace vector of influence between musical experience and the political sphere runs by way of aesthetics and feeling. New representational modes might challenge spectators to react in new ways, or a performance could prompt emotional reactions that changed the way listeners engaged with ideas central to the creation of a nation, ideas such as sympathy, community, progress, tradition, or sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> In these cases, *discourse* is often a crucial term that mediates between inarticulate but intense musical force

and political impact: the writings of contemporary listeners (most often journalists but also philosophers and some dilettantes) tend to converge on a few pregnant themes or problems or musical effects, pointing the way toward an understanding of how this music might have acted on groups of listeners and how its power might have been translated into thought and even action.<sup>18</sup>

The allusion to Samuel Beckett's drama of vain anticipation in this book's title is intended both ironically and sincerely. The sensation of "waiting" may capture something of the experience of Italians living in the first half of the nineteenth century, who sought—at first vaguely, then with more purpose—cultural icons and models that would foster a unified national identity and inspire activism. Of course, no one was waiting specifically for Verdi, nor even for the kinds of sounds and situations that his operas pioneered. In that sense my title is more apt as a description of the mindset of the scholars and opera fans who have told this story, over and over, since the 1860s than it is of the pre-1848 historical actors whose voices and actions fill these pages. If Verdi ever did arrive as a symbol of nation, this occurred not so much when his operas began to attract popular and critical acclaim in the 1840s, but fifteen or twenty years later, when the composer and his music were pressed into service as quasi-official signifiers of national pride. In this sense Verdi's arrival was so belated and so gradual as to be almost as anticlimactic as the process dramatized by Beckett. In a more ironic vein, blind anticipation could also be a figure for the efforts of writers on opera since Unification to paste together a coherent narrative of opera's significance—seeking, but never quite seizing, a critical mass of evidence or a truly convincing account of opera's role in the buildup to Unification.

#### BEFORE "VIVA VERDI"

Long dismissed as a movement of the elites that never succeeded in creating a culture that was both national and truly popular, the Risorgimento has recently been redefined as something more like a mass movement.<sup>19</sup> Its name literally referring to revival, rebirth, resurgence, the term *Risorgimento* gathers together a loose sequence of groups, movements, and social attitudes that worked to foster a shared identity among Italians, nurtured resistance to foreign rule, and eventually made possible the unification of the peninsula into a single state in 1861 (with Rome finally added in 1870). Even if leadership and decision-making were concentrated in the hands of an educated few, the

movement was rooted in a set of values shared to some degree by all Italians, regardless of class, social station, or political alignment.<sup>20</sup> Experience of live opera and participation in the conversations that operatic performances stimulated were similarly reserved for an educated elite; but operatic melodies could filter into the piazza, and the aesthetic ideas and social practices promoted by opera were disseminated just as widely, seeping into and gradually reshaping conceptions of what it meant to feel and act, to belong to a group, or to invoke the name of “Italy.” In much the same way, the plans of action formulated by a coterie of educated men in northern Italian cities were gradually transformed into widespread, popular, military actions resulting in the unification of the peninsula and the establishment of a constitutional government.

Even leaving aside the challenges of narrating a cultural history that makes room for the political force of musical works, it is difficult to bring the Risorgimento into focus as a single movement or historical progression. Not only did Italy’s halting march toward nationhood play out on the split levels of elite and popular action and decision-making, but the movement’s cardinal events were different in each of the peninsula’s city-states and kingdoms, and its governing ideas changed (at the least) with each decade. One account would involve the uprisings and revolutions that erupted periodically, in 1820, in 1831, more widely and with greater success in 1848, and then decisively in the sustained military engagements between 1859 and 1861. But revolution and eruptions of resistance are not the whole story; at least as significant for a history of cultural forms is the atmosphere of combined secrecy, complacency, and indirect utterance that shaped Italian speech during this period. Planning for revolution was carried out by secret societies such as the Carbonari and by political thinkers operating from safe perches in Switzerland, France, and England. And while resistance activities and speech were suppressed or expressed only in carefully controlled settings, it is also important that between the scattered flares of revolution life was comfortable and even complacent; most Italians lived most of the time in a state of unconflicted acceptance of foreign and absolutist rule, at least until 1848.<sup>21</sup>

Historians Alberto Banti, Paul Ginsborg, and Carlotta Sorba have examined the cultural texts and images that promoted the idea of a unified and autonomous Italy in the popular imagination, which by the late 1850s inspired large numbers of Italians to volunteer for the revolutionary forces and risk their lives for the idea of nation.<sup>22</sup> Banti focuses on a common set of beliefs and rituals around family, gender roles, and religion (many of which

play a prominent role in the operas of the time), while Sorba has teased out the multiple levels on which Italian culture and everyday life took on the forms and values of melodrama.<sup>23</sup> In the Risorgimento's final phase, roughly from 1848 until the convening of the first Italian parliament in 1861, this melodramatic populism fused with an increasingly hardy strain of pragmatism, as the deft statesman Camillo Cavour formulated the compromise that would position the Savoy king Vittorio Emanuele II as head of the new constitutional monarchy. What had been a scattered collection of local movements began to converge on a single agenda, led on two planes by charismatic populist hero Giuseppe Garibaldi and by Cavour, whose agenda shared none of the fiery idealism of Giuseppe Mazzini, whose utopian and theocratic vision had been influential before 1848. Once Garibaldi began to amass his army of volunteers and move south in 1859, the quiet laments and elegies of the earlier period were supplanted by more pugnacious songs narrating battles or inciting soldiers to fight, and the slogan "Viva VERDI" began to appear, as an acronym for "Vittorio Emanuele, Re d'Italia."<sup>24</sup>

Cultural messages like the "Viva VERDI" slogan were constructed by individuals or groups who wielded some legislative or communicative power and who had conscious plans to harness artistic works or a composer's image to political (and propagandistic) agendas.<sup>25</sup> Although still active in many cities, censorship was loosened (and during the revolutionary period in 1848 lifted altogether), and the values of what Banti has called the "Risorgimento canon" were broadly disseminated through cheap print products such as dime novels and posters. Before 1848, messages and motivations are more difficult to ascertain; documentation is both sparser and less transparent; and the vectors between music and such concepts as identity, morality, and mimesis were very much up for grabs. Constraints such as censorship and the abstract philosophical and moral tone that prevailed in Italian writing about music collude to render the sources opaque and often contradictory—all of which makes the period before 1848 both difficult to fathom and fascinating as an object of study.

Although the history of Risorgimento is full of nuances and contradictions, musicological approaches to this period in Italian history have largely construed it in baldly heroic terms, figuring the noble, oppressed Italy as bravely casting off Austrian rule, censorship, and oppression. Words like *emancipation* and *oppression* have echoed blithely through the literature, and images of rebels consigned to long terms in the Spielberg prison, plastering the walls of Milan with subversive broadsheets, or facing the firing squad

while singing opera—as the Bandiera brothers supposedly did in 1844, with a theme from Mercadante’s now-forgotten *Donna Caritea*—have been common coin. Later history shows that nationalism was a no less heady cocktail for Italians than for other European nations. While writing with excitement of opera’s role in the crystallization of a national sensibility, I hope also to give suitable weight to the caution and ambivalence with which musicians and intellectuals initially approached the national question, as well as to the spirit of accommodation and even apathy that informed many of their statements.

#### GUNFIRE IN THE DISTANCE

I’m writing so that you don’t worry that I have been killed in the gunfire. I am a man who is worried by few things, in fact, by just one: that is, if an opera of mine goes badly. I don’t care about the rest; I live because they let me live, I want to go on living even when I cannot live anymore, etc.<sup>26</sup>

When Gaetano Donizetti wrote home to reassure his family in Bergamo of his safety after the 1831 uprising in Rome, he complained that the government had closed the theaters for a few days. The letter, with its cheerful nod to a “live and let live” philosophy, is stamped with Donizetti’s unique combination of whimsical humor and pragmatism. But the proud declaration of indifference to politics, along with a wholehearted commitment to theatrical commerce, could have been uttered by almost any Italian composer of the time. Among scores of letters in which Bellini frets about how each of his new operas will be received, there is just a single one that alludes to the “liberal” politics of the audience for the first performances of *I puritani*, at Paris’s Théâtre-Italien.

The overwhelming tone of composers’ written statements was resolutely apolitical and somewhat out of step with the mood of the era. Even Verdi, who served as a senator in the first Italian parliament, seems to have noticed and engaged with the Risorgimento selectively, usually keeping practical theatrical and commercial concerns firmly in the foreground. When the 1848 revolutions broke out in Milan and Venice, Verdi was in Paris where he had taken up residence for a combination of professional and personal reasons. He expressed his excitement about the course of events in a letter to librettist Francesco Maria Piave:

You talk to me about music! . . . Do you think that I want to bother myself now with notes, with sounds? There cannot be any music welcome to Italian ears in 1848 except the music of the cannon! I would not write a note for all the money in the world: I would feel immense guilt at using up music paper, which is so good for making shells.<sup>27</sup>

As enthusiastic as Verdi sounds here, his rhetoric coincides with that of Donizetti's letter of 1831 in seeming to treat political action and musical expression as mutually exclusive. Just a few months later, though, Verdi would accept a commission to compose *La battaglia di Legnano*, which would become his most overtly revolutionary opera; in the same year he composed a patriotic hymn to words by Goffredo Mameli (who also wrote the words of the Italian national anthem) at the request of Mazzini.<sup>28</sup> The passionate commitment that led Verdi to devote creative energy to the revolutionary cause in 1848 was sporadic, however, alternating with more sustained moods of pragmatism and disillusionment once the revolutions were suppressed and Austria and the papal government returned to power.<sup>29</sup>

The tendency for composers to keep politics at a safe distance may be rooted in the institutional nature of opera, in which composers had to function partly as self-promoting businessmen, but might equally originate in the structures of musical education. It is not difficult to imagine the ways it would smooth the path of a composer doing business with theaters in multiple cities, under constantly shifting patronage and jurisdiction, to advertise that his primary loyalty was to compositional craft and theatrical impact. And the church- and conservatory-based training most composers received focused on skills and technique, distinct from the breadth of literary and historical knowledge covered at university or *liceo*. This indifference may also be partly a trick of perception: the virtuosic and highly conventional style of bel canto opera may have encouraged some interpreters to highlight composers' apolitical statements as a reflection of the music's style.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, what composers thought and felt is just one angle on the question, and a relatively minor one, as the case of Verdi clearly shows. No matter how explicitly or passionately Verdi supported Mazzini and the revolution in 1848 (or, indeed, before and after), there is scant evidence that audiences at the early performances of his operas perceived the same patriotic or emancipatory tones that many listeners find in them so easily now.<sup>31</sup> As I have already hinted, my focus in these pages will fall not on intention but on the social and intellectual circles in which opera was conceived, discussed, evaluated, and staged; on patterns of circulation; and on reception. The cast of characters in *Waiting*

*for Verdi* is large and varied, and many of its leading figures were polymaths and eccentrics, who were perhaps highly influential for a handful of years but almost completely forgotten since. Because opera was an important economic engine in Italy and across Europe, poets, journalists, and educators could count on work for an opera house to fill in the gaps between more permanent jobs. The margins of operatic history are crowded with stories of librettists and critics who turned to these pursuits after they had been dismissed from another position for their liberal or revolutionary views, or had fled or been exiled for political reasons. The chapters that follow trace the pathways of conversation, collaboration, and economic dependence among these various figures and the textual traces they have left—which include reviews, pamphlets on aesthetics, and private correspondence but also musical works, techniques, and events. The richness and multiplicity of the connections and of the cultural products generated reveals the opera house as an anchor and animating force for the period in a far more active way than has traditionally been described.

Are these connections, then, “networks” and their participants “historical actors”? In a literal sense, definitely not, since much of this book was drafted before I encountered the writings of Bruno Latour or his injunctions to “follow your actors.” In another sense, however, musicological writing has for almost twenty years been working with presentiments of and variations on Latour’s theory—his ways of tracking the flow and formation of ideas among social actors, his firm resistance to the idea that “society” could be a stable or preexisting concept to which we can relate events and texts, and his conviction that texts (and objects, and events) are not fixed things to be critiqued or deconstructed, but “gatherings” of human thought, effort, and action.<sup>32</sup> The Latourian element in this book has most to do with a notion of historical processes and political imagination as flowing from a tangle of messy, opaque, and often conflicting evidence, rather than from any fixed notion of “society” or “context.”<sup>33</sup> Within that fluid and constantly reforming complex of ideas and feelings, musical works and performances serve as sites around which social meaning can converge and crystallize, rather than as screens for interpretation or auratic objects that transport listeners to transcendent states of receptivity to community or patriotic commitment. (To understand “society” in this way perhaps comes especially easily to historians of nineteenth-century Italy, where every time a coherent social unit seems to come into view it is immediately destabilized by some uncooperative or dissenting voice.)

At a few points in each chapter, I venture suggestions that specific operatic scenes or musical passages can be heard as possessing social force, and propose

that they were experienced that way by contemporary audiences. Musicologists these days generally trust verbal evidence far more than musical evidence, wary that transfixed by some structural detail or ravishing vocal moment, we might lose touch with the historical listener. Yet written accounts of the musical cultures of the past may not be much more legible than musical works and can be equally prone to misreading. Anyone writing or composing in Italy during the first half of the nineteenth century knew that their words would be scrutinized by censors, but which words, ideas, and images would be forbidden and which permitted was always a bit of a mystery, depending on the mores of the specific city and regime in power, the whims of the censors, and the prestige of the authors.<sup>34</sup> Because of this, writers often stopped before even beginning to write anything that might take a clear position. Such sources need not be distrusted completely, but they certainly need to be *read through*—scanned for subtexts, placed in dialogue with other writings, and creatively interpreted. As I show in some detail in chapter 6, this often entails reading for loose or implicit associations between musical effects and topical issues, or for vignettes and imagery that seem out of place in the discussion of an opera but that point toward some veiled context or concern.

Still, even censored newspaper articles are made of words, whereas musical communication lacks even the imperfect referential stability of a language. In feeling my way toward modes of listening that seem historically responsible, I've been helped by work on a closely related set of issues in literary studies that includes the "distant reading" pioneered by Franco Moretti, Heather Love's advocacy of "thin description," and the "surface reading" theorized by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus.<sup>35</sup> Moretti's "distant reading" was an early digital humanities project using computer analysis to reveal patterns of diction, syntax, and subject matter in literary texts across styles, periods, and regions. The variant of distant reading that comes into play in *Waiting for Verdi*, without computers and with much smaller amounts of data, resembles a manic collecting spree or hoarding disorder. It involves gathering together as many instances of a single *type* of thing as possible and then reading that assemblage of musical works, or moments from works, as a kind of super- or macro-text. The dispersal into and across multiple examples thwarts any temptation to read operas as coherent, stylistically or structurally unified, generic, or convention breaking. Considering a body of music that features similar gestures or effects unseats the individual composerly voice and allows us to locate a social voice speaking through recurrence, pattern, and convention.

The critical paradigms of “thin description” and “surface reading” have in common an impatience with long-dominant styles of reading that would seize on a few telling moments from a text—inconsistencies, formal tics, or moments of exceptional force—only to treat those moments as “symptoms” of some underlying ideological framework. Although musicology was never quite as ruled by the hegemony of suspicious or symptomatic reading, the hermeneutic turn of the mid-1990s shared some of the same aims and strategies. As in literary studies, the substitution of simple, detailed *description* of events and techniques for more selective, goal-oriented interpretations might have a cleansing or renewing effect. Of course, musicologists have listened to musical surfaces before. More than a decade ago, Wye J. Allanbrook urged scholars of the eighteenth century to “theorize” the “comic surface,” by which she meant listening for the kaleidoscopic play of musical topoi that can function as characters or voices in eighteenth-century music, and thinking about the syntactical functions and sequencing of those topoi.<sup>36</sup> The “topoi” of nineteenth-century Italian opera are different—fewer dances, more sighs, swaggers, and storytelling in song—but on some level opera scholars have always known that the surface mattered.<sup>37</sup> Best and Marcus’s injunction to read from the surface can also be understood as an invitation to take seriously the messages sent by “surface” elements in music such as instrumentation and timbre, and especially to listen closely to musical moments that depend crucially on evoking a specific timbral world, such as tolling bells and fanfares, but also (for example) the adulterated, hollowed out, or nostalgic effects created when the characteristic contours of a fanfare are rendered in the more intimate timbres of woodwind instruments. Granting weight to such local effects shifts the scale on which we listen, directing attention to moment-to-moment events and away from larger-scale patterns. The vocabulary of musical description lacks terms for that intermediate space of the phrase or the paragraph, which is arguably where some of the most immediate and forceful musical communication occurs. With such a shift of scale, we might begin to probe elements like Donizetti’s use of small-scale repetition, or the dramatic pacing of Rossini’s operas, a topic that fascinated Stendhal but that is mostly lost to us now.<sup>38</sup>

. . .

*Waiting for Verdi* begins with a pair of chapters that engage with Rossini, examining how this music signified differently in the classicizing, imperial

atmosphere of Naples around 1815 and in the much more progressive climate of Milan, where the first literary debates about romanticism were launched just a few years later. Chapter 2 tackles the knotty problem of whether Italy experienced a “romantic era,” and specifically whether Italian opera could ever be said to have dabbled in romanticism.

Until the 1840s Italians writing about music continued to draw heavily on aesthetic assumptions and rhetorical conventions formulated by the Encyclopédistes a half century earlier. The shifting borders and shifting models of subjectivity that arrived with the Napoleonic period and the Congress of Vienna meant that these old assumptions were positioned against a new background and rapidly destabilized, so that for a time there seemed to be no clear consensus on questions such as what kinds of subject matter were suitable for dramatic representation on the stage, how music and words should be combined, or how music acted (or should act) on the listener. Into that mix entered the potent force of romantic thought, which was arguably disseminated most successfully in Italy not by literature or by the heated theoretical debates about literary style that recurred cyclically across the period, but by operas that showcased discrete elements of romantic influence.<sup>39</sup> The impact of romanticism on the Italian nineteenth century has until recently been underestimated, both because romantic thought never fully held sway or unseated classical values in Italy and because of long-standing doubt (extending back to Carl Schmitt in the 1920s) about the potential of romanticism to wield political force. Both Paul Ginsborg and Adrian Lyttelton have countered Schmitt’s cynicism, arguing that romanticism, through the very investment in fantasy that Schmitt demeaned, was a crucial force in rewriting the horizon of expectations for Italians, making the impossible seem possible, and ultimately mobilizing popular support for the abstract idea of a unified and autonomous Italy.<sup>40</sup>

My point of entry into the tangled, self-referential, and past-obsessed debates around Italian romanticism comes not via opera, but ballet: the “pantomimic ballets” choreographed by Salvatore Viganò, staged to great acclaim in Milan between about 1815 and 1823. Viganò was the darling of the artistic revolutionaries: while opera is barely mentioned in those early romantic debates, Viganò’s ballets are repeatedly praised as ideal examples of a hybrid genre (combining music and dance) and of powerful emotion expressed through the body, without words. Zeroing in on simultaneous performances in 1817 at La Scala of Rossini’s *La gazza ladra* and a ballet version of *Otello*, I discuss Viganò’s choreography and his use of music by Rossini and others to

show why ballet occupied such a central place in these formative debates about innovation and tradition in Italian art. It is tempting to imagine that Viganò stands in for the absent Beethoven: where pure instrumental music had not captured much public interest in Italy, the language of the mute body became another way to circumvent language and to silence the socially contaminated voice. By examining, in parallel, the language used to laud Viganò and the terms that governed the reception of Rossini during this period, this chapter speculates about why music was not yet admitted to romantic discourse.

Chapter 3 takes a new approach to an old question: the relationship between opera and history. It is a commonplace that opera and the novel in Italy became relevant to the national struggle only in the 1840s, as both genres began to represent formative events of the nation's deep history. But opera had already been "historical"—and, I argue, potentially topical—for three decades, staging power relationships between courtiers and monarchs, and the performance of absolute power through plots set at the Tudor court and the Spanish courts of the sixteenth century. Rossini's *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra* (1815) launched a fad for operas about Tudor queens, which eventually produced four separate "Tudor" operas by Donizetti and operas about Mary, Queen of Scots by Mercadante, Carlo Coccia, and many others. The chapter alternates between looking synoptically at the Tudor operas and their reception as a group, construing them as a sort of collective, half-articulate statement about power and statecraft in Restoration Italy, and closer examinations of scenes from a few representative works, especially Rossini's *Elisabetta* and Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*. What emerges is a clear progression—perhaps not surprisingly—away from allegory and glorification of the monarch toward a darker and more conflicted view of governance.

The book's second main section moves to Paris to consider operas and salon music produced by the sizeable community of Italian political exiles who landed in the French capital after the failed revolutions of 1831. The group encompassed many exiles and expatriates who had fled Italy after the failed uprisings of 1830–31, including librettists Carlo Pepoli (*I puritani*), Agostino Ruffini (*Marino Faliero*), and Giovanni Ruffini (*Don Pasquale*). Singers Giulia Grisi and Luigi Lablache were also important presences, as were Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti. Chapter 4 addresses the exceptional case of Donizetti's *Marino Faliero*, which provoked an ecstatic response from

Mazzini who greeted it in his “Filosofia della musica” (1836) as the harbinger of a new, “progressive” operatic style. The central section of the chapter asks: Why *Marino Faliero*? What was it about this opera that inspired Mazzini to single it out as an exemplar of the “music of the future”? One answer involves personal and intellectual connections between Mazzini’s circle and Donizetti’s that have not been much discussed before; but I also show that certain aspects of Donizetti’s approach to forms and pacing worked especially well to accommodate Mazzini’s expectations for a “progressive” musical style. Perhaps most importantly, the spin on a famous episode of Venetian history offered in Donizetti’s opera generated ideas about historical causality and about what might inspire someone to join a revolution: ideas that had urgent application to Mazzini’s political project in the mid-1830s.

The book’s Paris section closes with a chapter that tries to imagine the kinds of musical performances and political conversations that went on in the salons frequented by the exiles, using as a starting point some cryptic allusions to a Bellini opera that are embedded within groups of parlor songs by Rossini and Mercadante. The poetry for these song collections was written by the exiled poet Count Carlo Pepoli, known mainly as the librettist for Bellini’s last opera, *I puritani*. Both sets of songs contain lightly disguised allusions to *I puritani*, which was the operatic sensation of the moment, as well as to a raft of surprisingly stereotypical images of exoticized Italians—captured in such musical and poetic topoi as a Venetian barcarolle, a Neapolitan tarantella, and a seductive Tyrolienne. The similarities between the two cycles and their shared references to the Bellini opera grant insight into a mode of conversation and cultural activity that is usually opaque to history—the kinds of parlor games and subtle allusions that characterized conversation in the salon, an important counterpart to the official operatic culture at stake in the rest of *Waiting for Verdi*.

The book’s final section consists of a single chapter on Verdi’s operas of the 1840s. My focus here is not the famous *Nabucco*, which—as mentioned earlier—has been too much argued over and for which little documentary evidence survives. Instead I focus on Verdi’s next opera, *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (1843), which was also his first work to treat a theme from Italian history: the participation of the Lombard forces in the First Crusade to the Holy Land. I discuss the reception of Verdi’s opera in counterpoint with a group of influential literary and historical texts dealing with the Crusades and commentaries on the very successful paintings on national and historical subjects by Francesco Hayez. Whereas writers

on literature and painting seem to have been free, despite press censorship, to comment on the latent topical resonances of the works they critiqued, reviews of the opera are completely silent on these matters. Like the marginalization of Rossini in favor of choreographer Viganò before 1820, this bracketing of opera from political debates suggests that opera continued to occupy a special position in Italian cultural discourse, both central to and insulated from mainstream issues and opinion. While Italian music criticism had been fundamentally remade—invented, some might argue—in the years between Rossini's *Otello* or *La gazza ladra* and *I Lombardi*, the contrast between the receptions of Verdi and Hayez in the 1840s shows that opera maintained a veneer of otherness, of disconnection from worldly representation, which had come to embody both its uniqueness as a form of cultural representation and its animating power.

At the conference “Verdi’s Third Century,” held at New York University to mark the bicentenary of Verdi’s birth in November 2013, “Va pensiero” was heard three times, far outpolling any other bit of music by the birthday boy. Each occurrence was charged with intense emotion but also intellectual unease, and the performances themselves displayed a pronounced estrangement from the original operatic context and voicing, as well as from the political-interpretive frames that were for so long inescapable whenever “Va pensiero” was heard or discussed. The famous chorus was first heard in a paper about the Lega Nord’s use of Verdi’s iconic chorus in a performance that featured Zuleika Morsut, the winner of a beauty contest run by the northern Italian separatist party, who led the crowd in singing “Va pensiero” at a 2009 rally in the Lombard city of Pontida. Morsut’s untrained voice is badly miked, the recorded accompaniment distorted by feedback, and the crowd sings along at a leaden pace while throwing clouds of green confetti and waving banners bearing the symbols of the Lega.<sup>41</sup> Despite its low musical and visual production values, however, this performance conveys a convincing enthusiasm and populism. The next day “Va pensiero” was heard again in a paper on the uses of Verdi’s music by Austrian military bands. In a nice twist of irony, this arrangement of the chorus, made for military band in 1846, was based on an arrangement prepared by Joseph Tutsch, an Austrian resident of Milan who had also led the stage band at the première of *Nabucco*. The significance of the discovery that Austrian musicians almost certainly performed in the première of *Nabucco* was somewhat diminished by the

speaker's evident discomfort, his apparent (and unfounded) fear that these revelations would provoke angry and defensive responses.<sup>42</sup>

The chorus's third outing at the conference was live and unscripted—a sentimental, participatory singing of the chorus during dinner at one of the old Italian social clubs in Greenwich Village, joined with varying degrees of enthusiasm and expertise by all in attendance. This impromptu rendition of the chorus was intended as a sort of gift to Verdi, ignoring (of course) the fact that the chorus had earlier that day been implicated with racist and anti-immigrant policies of the Lega Nord. This sentimental performance by a group of well-informed historians of opera (joined by some theater people and opera lovers) reminds us how difficult it is to clear away the layers of historical and cultural significance that have accrued to Verdi, and to “*Va pensiero*,” over the past 150 years. Essentially, in 2013, as in 1913 (and today), if you're going to sing a bit of Verdi, it pretty much has to be “*Va pensiero*.” This was demonstrated again and again in Italy during the 150th anniversary of Unification in 2011, as when Riccardo Muti protested government cuts to the arts by leading the audience at the Rome Opera in a participatory encore of the chorus. In a brief speech from the podium Muti warned that “if we slay the culture on which the history of Italy is founded, truly our country will be beautiful and lost” (the last few words a loose quote from the chorus), then began an encore of the famous choral lament for a lost homeland, proposing that “we all sing along together.” As the sing-along rendition reached its climax, leaflets fluttered from the galleries in a powerful (and probably deliberate) echo of the opera-house protest that opens Luchino Visconti's 1954 film *Senso*. Muti's canny use of this music points to the fact that we need two parallel (or asymptotic?) histories: one of the uses to which “*Va pensiero*” has been put since its first explicitly political outings around 1859; and another, to track and evaluate the broader claims for the political uses and resonances of opera—including but not limited to Verdi—in the period during which Italy was first formulating its national voices.