

Korner, A; (2015) Verdi and the historians: politics, passion, and new mezzi di lavoro. [Review]. **Journal of Modern Italian Studies**, 20 (1) pp. 127-137. [10.1080/1354571X.2014.973161](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2014.973161). Downloaded from UCL Discovery: <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1460383>

REVIEW ARTICLE

Verdi and the Historians: Politics, Passion, and new “mezzi di lavoro”

Axel Körner, Department of History, University College London

Works under review:

Anselm Gerhard/Uwe Schweikert, eds, *Verdi-Handbuch*. Zweite überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage. Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2013. ISBN: 978-3-476-02377-3 Hardback

Roberta Montemorra Marvin, ed., *The Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-521-51962-5 Hardback

Carteggio Verdi-Morosini 1842-1901. Pietro Montorfani, ed. Lugano: Edizioni Città di Lugano / Istituto nazionale di studi verdiani, 2013. ISBN 9788885065536 Hardback

Susan Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera Women*. (Cambridge Studies in Opera, series editor Arthur Groos). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1-107-04382-4 Hardback

Verdi continues to evoke controversy between academics, among opera scholars as well as among historians. If under normal circumstances academic disagreement can be reduced to the availability of evidence and questions of methodology, this does not seem to be the case in debates on Verdi, in particular on *Verdi politico*. Opinions continue to be deeply divided; individual positions are defended with great passion; and there is little chance that differences can be reconciled. Emotions and beliefs more than reason and empirical research are at play. This being said, there seems to be little controversy as to Verdi's own political inclinations in favour of the national movement; and at least four of his early librettists openly supported the Risorgimento. What divides instead the field is the role his operas have played in articulating national feelings during the Risorgimento, and when this might have occurred. At stake here is the frequent recourse in popular opinion as well as in scholarship to a mythic connection between *italianità* and opera, the emotional attachment to a romantic notion of Italian national identity, which found expression in its relationship to music theatre and Italians' capacity to read opera politically. There is an underlying assumption that there is something specifically Italian about the connection between politics and opera, that Italians have an almost exclusive aesthetic relationship to music theatre, which forms an inherent part of their national character. In light of recent research, it has become increasingly difficult to support such claims, despite efforts among historians of the cultural and the emotional turn to seek such connections.

One part of this argument has to do with Verdi directly, the idea that the composer, from the beginning of the 1840s, was not just personally committed to the idea of an Italian nation state, but also that he used his music to propagate this vision. Much of this debate still centres around the reading of his *Nabucco*, premiered in 1842, an opera celebrated not only in Milan, but also in Vienna, in Venice (including performances after the revolution) and in many other parts of the Habsburg monarchy, where theatres were directly controlled by the Habsburg administration, which must have remained completely deaf to the nationalism allegedly expressed in the work. Only deafness might explain why members of the House of Habsburg, like Marie-Louise, Duchess of Parma and daughter of Franz II, happily accepted the dedication of Verdi's *Lombardi* (1843), or why Verdi became one of the preferred composers of Emperor Franz Joseph – surprising given that he allegedly owed the loss of his Kingdom Lombardy-Venetia to the inspiring political power of Verdi's music. While this is an argument about Verdi's political intentions as composer, the other part of the argument has to do with Italians and their reception of Verdi's operas, the idea that already prior to the election of Pope Pius IX and the revolutions, prior to the period 1846-1849, Italians appreciated and read Verdi's work in a political key, as a commitment to the nation as a political community, and that their national feelings were at least partly generated through Verdi's music. As Anselm Gerhard, in one of the volumes under review here, concludes, there is not a single contemporary source which would prove that *Nabucco* evoked national feelings among its original audiences.¹ A related point in this debate is the extent to which the alleged political reception of Verdi's music was reflected in the musical history of 1848 itself. While occasional patriotic references to individual performances of *Ernani* (1844) and *Attila* (1846) are well documented, and *La battaglia di Legnano* of 1849 partly served as a propaganda piece when it was first performed in Rome, the numerous collections of songs and choruses emerging from the revolution itself do not offer much evidence that Verdi's music served as a great inspiration for the revolutionaries on the barricades.

It is of little help if later generations of historians read political content into the libretti; what matters is how Verdi's works were received at the time. Therefore much of this argument could be referred back to a critical assessment of the sources of reception. As one of the books under review here argues, it is surprising how many of the Risorgimento's protagonists either never mentioned Verdi in any political context, or took an openly hostile attitude towards opera as a whole. Susan Rutherford provides the example of Massimo d'Azeglio, Cesare Cantù, Caterina Franceschi Ferrucci and Domenico Guerrazzi, among others, who never mention Verdi and had a problematic relationship with opera, exactly because music theatre seemed to them insufficiently reflective of Europe's social and political developments. "It seems odd", Rutherford writes, "if Verdi's main role in this period was indeed one of the political awakening of his audience (as Massimo Mila suggests, describing his operas as 'a voice of national consciousness and a decisive authoritative force of the liberation'), that its effects were all but inaudible to some of his most committed brothers- and sisters-in arms." (29) Some of the movement's supporters were openly hostile to Verdi and often enough his work was criticized for lacking patriotic credentials.

¹ Anselm Gerhard, "Verdi-Bilder", in: *Verdi Handbuch*, 2-27, 16. The same view is supported by Michael Walter who authored the book's entry "Nabucodonosor", 354. The most influential work questioning the myths around *Nabucco* is Roger Parker, 'Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati'. *The Verdian patriotic chorus in the 1840s*. Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 1997. Some of the arguments on the other side of the spectrum are summarised in Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera*. University of Chicago Press, 2008

Undoubtedly, Verdi at some point openly identified with the national movement, certainly from the mid-1840s onwards. The role of the acronym VERDI as reference to Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia during the final stages of the Risorgimento has recently been supported by new evidence.² Both sides of the debate agree that at some point Verdi became an important symbol of the Italian nation and that this development facilitated that his works were read in a national key. The question still being hotly debated is about the when. This journal has contributed to the debate on nation and opera as well as to the more specific issue of Verdi and politics, creating a forum for historians and musicologists on both sides of the debate.³ Despite its operatic focus, the argument is of great interest to more general historians of modern Italy and key to many of the questions commentators have raised for the past two hundred years over Italians' sense of national identity. Since the 1980s, historians' renewed interest in the origins of nationalism – marked by the publication of the works of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Miroslav Hroch and Anthony Smith – has helped to critically rethink connections between nationalism as a social movement and the language of national ideology. Among historians of the Risorgimento, the move away from socio-economic approaches towards a new focus on culture and ideas has mirrored this trend, exemplified by the publication of Alberto Banti's *La nazione del Risorgimento*, which emphasised the allegedly close connection between opera and politics during the Risorgimento.⁴ Despite these historiographical developments, arguments concerning the connection between opera and politics, or between Verdi and the Risorgimento, have remained controversial. Too often assumptions are made simply because they seem plausible; or arguments are not supported by a critical assessment of the sources. Even academic historians and musicologists tend to approach their topic from the point of view of a particular conviction, of values and insights gained independently of their research, obscuring a discussion which would benefit from a clearer focus on the methodological and theoretical approaches to empirical research. What is more, historians interested in the connection between music and national identity do not always fully digest research by musicologists. This article wants to make some of this recent work by opera scholars available to the historical profession.

In a debate still partly driven by emotions, the only solution seems to separate patriotic feelings from facts by way of historical research. In the case of Verdi even that is not always easy. While works like the new *Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia*, the *Verdi Handbuch* or Eduardo Rescigno's *Dizionario verdiano*⁵ make information about every known detail readily available, access to sources for further research remains problematic. Anselm Gerhard, co-editor of one of the volumes under review here, recently pointed out that the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani in Parma employs no more than 2 permanent scholars, compared to 11 specialists working for the Beethoven-Haus in Bonn and 12 academically

² Francesca Vella, *Verdi Reception in Milan, 1859-1881: Memory, Progress and Italian Identity* (PhD diss., King's College London, 2014)

³ *Opera and Nation in Nineteenth-Century Italy*. Special Issue: *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 17/4, September 2012

⁴ For a critical debate of this aspect of Banti's argument see Axel Körner, "The Risorgimento's literary canon and the aesthetics of reception: some methodological considerations", *Nations and Nationalism*, 15/3 (July 2009), 410-418

⁵ Eduardo Rescigno, *Dizionario verdiano*. Milan: Rizzoli, 2001

trained scholars working for the Goethe-Schiller Archiv in Weimar.⁶ While other countries consider it a question of national pride to provide the means for scholarly editions of its leading artists, academics and writers, the scientific director of the Istituto in Parma, Emilio Sala, had to find private sponsors to continue with the critical edition of Verdi's letters. Verdi's sketches for *Rigoletto* were published in 1941, those for *La traviata* in 2000. At this pace opera scholars will have to wait several more centuries before being able to engage with the entirety of Verdi's work. The material for *Don Carlos*, *Aida*, *Otello* and *Falstaff* are all still in private hands, inaccessible to independent research. Although a number of scholars have had the opportunity to inspect Verdi's personal library, there is no catalogue of his many books, which include numerous foreign language titles, French editions of German music, and many scholarly books.⁷ After the composer's death, manuscripts, his correspondence and personal papers were passed on to his adopted daughter Maria Filomena Verdi; and it is still the family, which decides on access to the carefully selected documents. Few scholars, including the biographers Gatti, Abbiati and Philips-Matz, have enjoyed this privilege, although none of them ever had full access to the papers.⁸ Divisions among the heirs turn the prospect of improved access to the sources into an almost hopeless venture.

The difficult situation of Verdi scholarship, more than a century after the composer's death, makes regularly updated guides to available sources and summaries of recent research even more important. Yearly bibliographic information appears in the periodical *Studi Verdiani*. After a very useful collection of essays in form of a *Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, published a decade ago, and a new edition of Gregory Harwood's Research Guide, the bicentenary of Verdi's birth in 2013 has led to the publication of a number of important new *mezzi di lavoro*, which help researchers to catch up with recent debates.⁹ The new *Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia* is an extremely valuable starting point for Verdi scholars, opera enthusiasts, as well as for academics with wider interests. The hefty volume offers almost 1000 entries on Verdi's life and music, on performance practice and venues, and countless people associated with the composer professionally or privately, acknowledging different spellings of names. For instance, the *Encyclopedia* includes the names and in most cases the biographies of every single member of the casts appearing in the premieres of Verdi's operas. Tables of characters and their creators make it easy to identify particular individuals and their roles. Likewise, even less well-known impresari, critics and performers are given ample space. Particularly useful is the detailed biographical information provided on Verdi's librettists and their associates. Entries on individual cities and particular theatres help to explain the extent to which Verdi's music penetrated different parts of the peninsula.

⁶ Anselm Gerhard, "Weltkulturerbe unter Verschluss. Vor 200 Jahren wurde Giuseppe Verdi geboren. Um seinen Nachlass wird bis heute gestritten – zum Leidwesen der Forscher", in: *Tages-Anzeiger*, 03/10/2013, 24.

⁷ For information on Verdi's library see Pierluigi Petrobelli, "De l'alexandrin à l'anapeste chez Verdi. Structure poétique et composition musical dans *Un ballo in maschera*", in : Hervé Lacombe, ed., *L'opéra en France et en Italie (1791-1925). Une scène privilégiée d'échanges littéraires et musicaux. Actes du colloque franco-italien tenu à l'Académie Musicale de Villecroze (16-18 Octobre 1997)*. Paris : Société Française de Musicologie, 2000, 215-222, 215 f

⁸ Franco Abbiati, *La vita e le opere di Giuseppe Verdi*. Milan: Ricordi, 1959. Carlo Gatti, *Verdi*. Milan: Alpes, 1931. English trans.by Elisabeth Abbot, *Verdi. The Man and His Music*. New York: Putnam, 1955. Mary Jane Philips-Matz, *Verdi. A biography*. Oxford: OUP, 1993

⁹ Scott L. Balthazar, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Gregory W. Harwood, *Giuseppe Verdi: A Research and Information Guide*. Second edition. New York / London: Routledge, 2012.

In addition to basic background and synopsis, the extensive articles on individual operas, in all their different versions, discuss the emergence of each work within the wider context of Verdi's vita and relate it to other works by the composer. The entries on individual works are not aimed at replacing Julian Budden's three-volume set on Verdi's operas, but they present a welcome addition to Roger Parker's collected entries in the *New Grove*.¹⁰ All of these entries include sections on the reception of the premiere and of later stagings. While the format of individual entries leaves relatively little room for academic debate and controversy, the *Encyclopedia* includes biographies of the most influential Verdi scholars and an excellent bibliography of scholarly work, periodicals in the field and source collections.

Going beyond the relatively short entries in the Cambridge Encyclopedia, the most ambitious of the new manuals is the *Verdi Handbuch*, edited by Anselm Gerhard and Uwe Schweikert, a hefty volume of almost 800 pages, which appeared in its second, substantially enlarged and updated edition in time for the anniversary of Verdi's birth. As Gundula Kreuzer was able to demonstrate in a recent monograph, Verdi played a crucial role in the emergence of a German modernist aesthetic; but the long tradition of German language scholarship on Verdi is not always adequately acknowledged among Italian and Anglo-American experts.¹¹ Bringing together scholarship from both sides of the Atlantic, the volume's focus is strongly research-oriented, with the aim of helping musicologists, historians and professionals in the performing arts to familiarise themselves with the most recent debates on Verdi. Most of the contributors to the *Handbuch* belong to the younger generation of musicologists, born between the mid-1960s and the 1980s. Seven substantial chapters discuss Verdi's works within the changing context of societal and musical developments in nineteenth-century Italy. These chapters constitute the most relevant contribution to the debate for historians of the Risorgimento and of liberal Italy. The chapters bear witness to an excellent up-to-date knowledge of recent historiographical debates, which in turn should encourage historians to engage more closely with the research of their colleagues working in the musicological profession. Separate chapters examine the audiences of Verdi's operas; networks of patronage; editorial practices; censorship; and the role of religion. Contrasting with conventional accounts, which tend to take a teleological approach to the history of the Risorgimento, Martina Grempler illustrates the extent to which early and middle Verdi has to be understood as the product of the connections between the Italian states and the Habsburg rulers: ten of Verdi's operas were premiered in the two capitals of the Austrian kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia (Milan and Venice); *Macbeth* (1847) was premiered under Habsburg rule in the Tuscan capital; *Il corsaro* (1848) and *Stiffelio* (1850) in Austria's most important port city Trieste.¹² Not a single Verdi opera was premiered in Piedmont-Sardinia; and after Unification Verdi mostly wrote for foreign stages. Without the Habsburgs no Verdi? One is reminded of Carlotta Sorba's book *Teatri*, which demonstrated that most of Italy's major opera theatres were built under the Habsburgs.¹³ Obviously, Verdi struggled with Italy's political structures prior to Unification; but as Grempler argues in her chapter on the relationship between theatre and the political authorities, possible political undertones were

¹⁰ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*. 3 vv. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Roger Parker, *New Grove Guide to Verdi and his Operas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹¹ Gundula Kreuzer, *Verdi and the Germans. From Unification to the Third Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010

¹² Martina Grempler, "Italien zwischen Restauration, Risorgimento und nationaler Einheit", in: *Verdi Handbuch*, 30-41, 33.

¹³ Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri. L'Italia del Melodramma nell'eta' del Risorgimento*. Bologna: il Mulino, 2001

not necessarily the only focus of the censors. More often they were concerned about issues of morality and religion, about the impact a work might have on the state's diplomatic relations, or about possible connections between the plot and living people. Theatre was supposed to make a contribution to the audience's moral improvement: Violetta's "Sempre libera" from *La traviata* certainly did not fit this category. As a matter of fact, the censors had no difficulties with *Nabucco* or *Attila*, often read as Risorgimento operas, while they were deeply concerned about the moral implications of *Rigoletto*. Moreover, the censors seem to have been more rigorous when it came to prose theatre; and often they wanted to tone down aspects of an opera rather than outlaw the work completely. The office of censorship was usually a division of the police, but the censors themselves often had a literary or academic background. Even in the Habsburg possessions the head of the police was usually Italian, making it even more difficult to speak of "foreign" censorship. In Verdi's times the head of Milan's police was Carlo Giusto Torresani and at least before 1848 his censorship regime was considered the most liberal among the Italian states. The Habsburg officers attending the theatres were also to a large extent Italians. In this sense Grempler helps to demystify the political history behind the performance of opera.

What sections of the population listened to Verdi or knew about his work? Sebastian Werr's chapter demonstrates how throughout the nineteenth century, opera increasingly reached wider sections of the Italian population, questioning the idea of an elite entertainment. To a large extent this was the achievement of so-called secondary commercial theatres, but also of travelling troops and of mechanically reproduced music. Compared to the majority of the *Handbuch's* chapters, which understand music theatre as a transnational European phenomenon, Vittorio Coletti's contribution takes a more conventional approach, reading opera principally as "national culture", in line with the still-dominant trends in the historiography on nineteenth-century Europe. It is not surprising, then, that Coletti's argument is insufficiently supported by the relevant sources of reception, which would serve to prove his case.¹⁴ Semantic connections between Italy's political language and the libretti are historically relevant only if there are proof (in the form of sources of reception) that contemporary audiences themselves – composers, librettists, or audiences - made the same associations, reading these works politically. For the historian in the twenty-first century it is not sufficient to speculate on possible connections; and to assume that the term *patria* is necessarily associated with the Italian nation seems to ignore the important semantic shifts in the use of both concepts throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, a constitutional monarchist using the term *patria* was not necessarily a supporter of national Unification. Even after Unification the term *patria* continues to be used with reference to individual cities or regions. In his own contribution to the volume, Anselm Gerhard concludes that there are no indicators that before the end of the 1840s any of Verdi's operas were understood as political manifestations. This myth was constructed retrospectively, after Unification, and used as a tool to reunite the different factions of Italy's national movement.¹⁵

The book's second section examines Verdi's work under a number of thematic headings, and is of perhaps greater interest to musicologists and scholars of literature. Individual chapters here look at Verdi's libretti, dramatic structures, his musical language, editorial history, the role of ballet and staging practice. Over 250 pages of the *Handbuch* are dedicated to single articles on Verdi's oeuvre, including all of his operas as well as his other

¹⁴ Vittoria Coletti, "Eine nationale Sprache für Verdis Opern", in: Verdi Handbuch, 42-53, 44 f

¹⁵ Gerhard, "Verdi-Bilder", 17

works, abandoned opera projects, and his correspondence. Each of these articles provides technical information, facts about premieres and original casts, a detailed synopsis, a commentary, information on each work's reception and a detailed bibliography. Gerhard's well documented introduction to the volume deals with "Verdi-Bilder" (Verdi images), an exemplary study of how personalities and their biographies are culturally and politically constructed, invented, self-made. The chapter is a warning against taking these images at face value. Also extremely useful is the volume's apparatus, including a chronology, an excellent map, bibliography, indices, a glossary, and short biographical entries on major figures in Verdi's entourage.

For historical approaches to Verdi, and for the reconstruction of the political context, the composer's correspondence constitutes a source of major importance; and it seems almost incomprehensible that, more than a century after Verdi's death, access to this material is still restricted, in contrast to the regulation of public archives and the conditions of access to the material of almost any other nineteenth-century literary figure of public interest. This situation makes the slowly emerging volumes of the critical edition of Verdi's correspondence an important resource for opera scholars and historians alike, although to date only a small portion of the over 15000 letters has been published in critical editions, including the composer's correspondence with Ricordi for the short but important period from 1880 to 1888. Edited by Pietro Montorfani, Verdi's correspondence with Emilia Morosini and members of her family has now appeared as the eighth volume of the Edizione Critica dell'Epistolario Verdiano, published by the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani and the Archivio Storico Città di Lugano. This volume of the *carteggio* is of particular interest, because it stretches over the long period from 1842 to 1901 (though with significant interruptions). Emilia Morosini, née Zeltner, formed part of the cosmopolitan aristocratic patronage network around Verdi in Milan. In addition to the correspondence with Emilia, the volume contains letters exchanged between Verdi and Emilia's daughter Giuseppina, who became Countess Negroni Prati; the correspondence between Boito and Giuseppina Morosini (starting in 1886); as well as a substantial appendix of articles from periodicals and other materials referred to in the correspondence. The excellent apparatus to the volume makes this edition a hugely valuable research tool for almost every period of Verdi's life.

Verdi made the acquaintance of Emilia Morosini immediately after the success of *Nabucco* in 1842, and some of their correspondence suggests that they formed a close and intimate relationship at the time. Verdi also became the piano teacher of Morosini's daughter Giuseppina. The correspondence helps to demonstrate the extent to which Verdi's early success also depended on noble patronage networks, an argument recently recast by Anselm Gerhard and contrasting with the myths that reduce the depiction of Verdi to the simple man of the people.¹⁶ In 1848 Verdi's relationship with the Morsini family suddenly broke off, at a time when Verdi estranged himself from several of his Milanese friends, many of whom were patriots and involved in the political events that shook Lombardy during the middle period of the Risorgimento. Many years later, in 1872, Emilia's daughter Giuseppina Negroni Prati revived the relationship, leaving a further three decades of correspondence covering the period up to Verdi's death in 1901. Like her mother before, Giuseppina also

¹⁶ Anselm Gerhard, "*Cortigiani, vil razza bramata!* Reti aristocratiche e fervor risorgimentali nella biografia del giovane Verdi", *Acta Musicologica*, LXXXIV (2012), 37-63. See also the recent conference at Villa Vigoni: "Compositori d'opera e stratificazione sociale: il ruolo della nobiltà nell'Ottocento europeo", http://www.villavigoni.it/contents/events/Vigoni_ProgrammaDEF.pdf

used a surprisingly intimate language in the letters to her former piano teacher. Giuseppina was a friend of another influential figure of Verdi's former Milanese circle, Andrea Maffei, who had known Verdi since 1834. An expert on Schiller, Maffei wrote the libretto to *I masnadieri* and revised Piave's version of *Macbeth*. As in the case of Morosini, Verdi broke with Maffei in 1848, reviving the relationship after a decade, in the late 1850s. In his letters to the Morosini family Verdi talks openly about his first international experiences, as well as about the fate of his early operas in the major Italian theatres. The volume also offers much detailed information on Verdi's life during the last three decades of his life.

In addition to revealing new information on the creation and performance of several of Verdi's most important works, reconstructing the composer's Milanese networks helps us to understand the relationship between artists, intellectuals and social elites in Milan during the period of Italian Unification. After the publication of this first volume of correspondence with one of Verdi's female friends, scholars await a volume containing Verdi's exchange of letters with Clarina Maffei with great anticipation. The composer's close relationship with many female members of the Milanese aristocracy offers researchers material to reassess the representation of gender relations in Verdi's operas and invites speculation about how women may have responded to his work. Susan Rutherford's *Verdi, Opera, Women* abstains from reducing the topic "women in opera" to a simplistic mirror of their position in society. Instead, she uses "women in opera" to discuss gender in nineteenth-century Europe more generally, integrating gender relations on stage with the survey of an impressively wide web of other source materials reflecting women's position in society. For instance, Rutherford reads situations such as Gilda's rape in *Rigoletto* against contemporary courtroom evidence and other personal accounts of victims, leading to a complex debate of what constitutes rape in nineteenth-century Europe. Her project involves rethinking the role of the female protagonists in Verdi's operas, which include devoted mothers as well as hate-driven villainesses, pious virgins and liberated courtesans, warriors and witches, desperate lovers and feisty townswomen. How did these narratives about women relate to the history of women during the nineteenth century? How were they shaped by real life experiences and what did female spectators make of them? How does Verdi connect female characters to real women, women on stage to the politics of gender? And how did Verdian singers incorporate these roles? In a new "post-feminist age", at a time when many academic disciplines consider a deliberate focus on gender an agenda of the past, Rutherford has produced another meticulously researched monograph, which takes women and gender relations as its principal focus. Following her acclaimed study *Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930*,¹⁷ her book shows how fruitful a gender perspective in opera studies can be, and how much territory still demands exploration. The book's very substantial methodological and theoretical "prologue" is informed by a stimulating dialogue with literary and film scholars, historians of gender, cognitive scientists and other disciplines, while at the same time being shot-through with perceptive and often amusing anecdotes from the sources.

The project involves some insightful statistical analyses: twelve of Verdi's heroines die, but so too do fifteen of his male heroes. Six women and five men commit suicide, often for love. Five women are murdered, four of them by their partners, against only two men, of whom only one is murdered by his lover. Seven men die for political reasons, against just one woman (179). Today some of Verdi's heroines might appear to us unrealistic, stiff and

¹⁷ Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006

artificial. Such perceptions risk judging opera by the wrong means, ignoring the fact that as a medium opera was not just concerned with the presentation of a specific dramatic narrative, but that the genre also served to represent particular characters by means of music, as an abstract outline of human experiences, staging a variety of interpersonal situations. Verdi and his librettists were masters at filling these characters with life; and it is their individual power, not just the plot in which they are involved, which means that these works still matter to us. Rutherford's analysis gives us the reasons why many of these works continue to speak to us, why we are still mesmerised by Verdi.

In fashioning his characters, Verdi almost exclusively used foreign drama, ideas he received from Dumas, Hugo, Schiller, Scribe and Shakespeare, speaking a largely cosmopolitan emotional language. Rutherford, like the other authors under review here, helps us to reconstruct this cosmopolitan and transnational dimension behind Verdi's operas: that much as to the idea of Verdi as a quintessentially Italian phenomenon. A particular challenge for Rutherford is the organisation of the rich dramatic material of Verdi's operas, adopting a welcome thematic approach (rather than dividing the material according to the established categories of the early, middle and late Verdi). This strategic decision results in chapters discussing the topics war, prayer, romance, sexuality, marriage, death and laughter. Her analysis confirms the extent to which Verdi's operas provided for plenty of debate on social, cultural and legal conventions during a period of remarkable social change in Europe. From a societal perspective, all this is highly political, but according to Rutherford this does not mean that his operas constituted "political theatre" (28). While Verdi's "portrayal of women revealed the prejudices of his epoch", he "challenged the limits of those confines", presenting us with an image of women "that more closely responded to the lived experience of his spectators than that of any other previous Italian composer." (211) Verdi offers us insights into the social and cultural make-up of his time, insights which no historian of nineteenth-century Europe should ignore.