

## *La traviata* and Verdi, Man of the World

The most celebrated Italian composer of the nineteenth century was a man of many parts. He served as an elected Member of Parliament and was also a conscientious farmer. He bred cattle and horses, experimented with new strains of grapes, wheat and corn, and established his own abattoir from which he eventually sold pork products under the 'GV' brand name. Although he cultivated the fiction that he was just a peasant, he was in fact a shrewd businessman.

Born into modest (though not impoverished) circumstances, Giuseppe Verdi eventually came to own some thirty farms and estates with associated buildings. He monitored his business interests closely, required daily or weekly reports from his farm managers and, on occasion, even compiled these reports himself. He was the landlord of numerous tenants, invested substantially in railway stock and bank bonds, and died, aged eighty-eight, a wealthy and greatly honoured man. He understood the world, drove hard bargains, gave large amounts to charity and was well acquainted with personal tragedy; all of which gave his operas a force and conviction that still rings true more than a century later.

And Verdi's parliamentary career? That began in 1861 when, at the insistence of Cavour - the Prime Minister of the newly independent Kingdom of Italy - he stood for election as a Deputy to the first National Parliament. He didn't seek a second term in 1865, but at least he could say that he had personally experienced the more prosaic business of government in areas such as education, flood control, agriculture, theatre and public services, as well as the high drama of the *Risorgimento* which had brought about a modern, free and united Italy.

Technically, Verdi was born a Frenchman, and he was baptised not Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco but Joseph Fortunin Françoise. His birthplace was the village of Roncole, near Parma. Europe in those days had been turned upside down by the French Revolution, and after 1796, successive French armies had crossed the Alps to bring Liberty, Equality and Fraternity to Italians, and also to rob, tax, and conscript them. By 1813, Napoleon had absorbed the greater part of six Italian states directly into France and, amongst these, was the former Duchy of Parma, in which Verdi was born. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the Congress of Vienna assigned the French territories in Italy to Austria; which is how the Austrians came to govern much of Italy for almost five decades. In later years, Verdi had the satisfaction of being feted by the President of France at the Elysée Palace and receiving the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour.

Verdi, the master of character and mood - that's how we see him today. But, initially, his contemporaries were attracted to other qualities. Patriotism was one of them. It meant a lot to Verdi, and he consciously projected it onto his early operas and even on some of his later ones as well. In *Nabucco*, his third opera and first great success, the Israelites, captive in Babylon, yearn for their homeland in a long, slow and memorable chorus that begins: "Go, my thought, on golden wings". Italian patriots identified this with their own predicament in their Austrian captivity, as Verdi knew that they would. The text was drawn from the Bible (which made it difficult to censor), but the spirit of the music was indisputably Italian.

The young Verdi's appeal to patriotism was rather blatant, but it suited the times. At the premiere of *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (The Lombards at the First Crusade) performed in 1843, the audience compared themselves with the Crusaders, and the Austrians with the Saracens defiling the Holy Land. Success could never be taken for

granted, but it has to be said that the patriotic subtexts of many of the early works did them no harm. In *Attila*, written in 1846, a Roman general addressed the invading Hun: "You may have the universe, but leave Italy to me", and the audience rose to cheer.

Even in *Macbeth*, Verdi managed to introduce a chorus for Scottish exiles who sing *O patria oppressa* (O fatherland oppressed). During early performances of this opera in Venice, the audience threw onto the stage bouquets of red and green, the Italian colours, until this was forbidden, whereupon they threw bouquets of yellow and black, the Austrian colours, and took pleasure in watching the singers refuse to pick them up.

When Verdi was in his late twenties, he suffered an appalling calamity: his two young children and then his wife Margherita all died within a short space of time, and he was left in complete desolation. Verdi's immediate reaction to this disaster was to give up composition, especially when his second opera, the comedy *Un giorno di regno* failed. But time healed the emotional wounds and he was persuaded to write *Nabucco*, which was given its first performance in Milan in 1842.

The soprano who created the demanding role of Abigaille was Giuseppina Strepponi, a member of a musical family and two years Verdi's junior. In 1843, composer and soprano began an affair. Strepponi had had numerous liaisons and had given birth to three – perhaps four – children to different fathers. The babies were either given away or abandoned at the Ospedale degli Innocenti, or died at birth. For the times, that was not unusual.

Strepponi had been an established *prima donna* of the works of Bellini and Donizetti, but she encouraged and supported the young Verdi. At thirty-one she retired from the stage and became a singing teacher in Paris, and it was there that she and Verdi - like Alfredo and Violetta - seriously began their life together.

With his 'Peppina', Verdi again found happiness. She was charming, intelligent, sensitive, a splendid linguist and, as one editor called her '*la parisienne parfait*'. For a while the couple frequented the most important salons but, in time, they came to shun the public life, preferring the privacy of country living. They left the city - again like Violetta and Alfredo - and took a small villa in the country, at Passy.

In 1849 they returned to their homeland and set up house on a farm at Sant' Agata, near Parma, which remained Verdi's base for the rest of his life. Not surprisingly, the relationship drew criticism, especially since Verdi and Strepponi lived together for twelve years before marrying. The narrow-minded Italian provincials virtuously kept apart from Verdi's 'Violetta', and gossips had it that Giuseppina's poor health was punishment from above. Verdi turned a deaf ear to the criticism and 'advice' of those who assailed him, but when his first wife's father, whom he respected, joined the chorus of disapproval, Verdi wrote a long letter to him in reply. It could easily have come from the pen of Germont  *fils*:

"You live," Verdi wrote, "in a place which has the evil habit of mixing frequently into the affairs of others and of disapproving of everything which does not conform to their ideas; I habitually do not interfere, if I am not asked, in others' affairs, precisely because I insist that no one interfere in mine..."

"I have no difficulty whatsoever in lifting the curtain which will reveal the mysteries closed in four walls and tell you of my life at home. I have nothing to hide. In my house lives a free woman, independent, a lover like me of the solitary life, who has a

fortune which shields her from every need. Neither I nor she owes to anyone at all an account of our actions; but, on the other hand, who knows what relationships exist between us? What affairs? What rights I have over her and she over me? Who knows whether she is or is not my wife?...Who knows whether this is good or bad? Why might it not even be good? And if it were bad, who has the right to hurl curses?"

*'Continue to love me, love me even after death.'*

For her part, on another occasion, Giuseppina wrote to Verdi: "Oh, my Verdi, I am not worthy of you; and the love which you have for me is a gift, a balm to a heart which is many times very sad under its apparent happiness. Continue to love me, love me even after death, when I present myself before Divine Justice, rich with your love and your prayers, oh my Redeemer!"

*'Continua ad amarmi, amami, anche dopo morta'* – the words are Giuseppina's but the sentiments are also Violetta's.

It is not entirely clear why Verdi and Giuseppina avoided formal matrimony for so long. One explanation has it that Verdi had promised his first wife that he would never marry again. A more likely reason is that after the tragic end of his first family when (in the words of Macduff) heaven had looked on "and would not take their part", Verdi had no heart for another relationship of this kind. He was an agnostic in religious matters and saw no reason to invoke the church. Giuseppina was more devout. "I won't say he is an atheist", she wrote, "but certainly not much of a believer." He laughed at her expressions of faith and said she and other believers were "all mad". It was only by virtue of Strepponi's constancy and strength that he eventually felt able to remarry.

There were testing times, such as when a rival soprano, Teresa Stolz, came to live at Sant' Agata, leading Giuseppina to suspect that Stolz had become Verdi's mistress. Giuseppina herself has been described as a splendid woman, warm-hearted, intelligent, and devoted to a man who, with all his honesty and integrity, could be moody and irascible. She was still at his side on the first night of *Falstaff*, his last, miraculous work completed when he was eighty.

**Peter Bassett**