

Musings about Giuseppe Verdi and His 200th Anniversary

Steve Acunto * (December 14, 2013)



"I have always found it interesting that people will ask you whether you like Wagner or not, but when it comes to Verdi they will ask which of Verdi's works you like the most."

"Many Minded" is how Homer, the first poet of Western Civilization, has been described: "many minded" – it's Yeats' expression for the incredible variety, depth and scope of the poet's work.

We may confidently apply that same epithet to Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante, Ovid, Virgil and, in modern times as well, to Verdi for the qualities that are ubiquitous in his masterpieces. Verdi achieved a variety and depth much like that of Shakespeare, Hugo, Schiller and the other geniuses whose works were seminal to Verdi's libretti and to his inspiration.

We celebrate the 200th anniversary of Verdi's birth with a sense of closeness, familiarity and shared sentiment as with few other creators. For the better part of the past 200 years, ever increasingly, Verdi's music has become part of our listening vocabulary, part of our spiritual rhythm and an unmistakable part of popular culture. It is no accident that music from Italian opera, particularly Verdi, Puccini and Rossini, has worked its way into movie soundtracks, popular music "knock offs", TV themes and even the raucous world of advertising. "La donna è mobile" alone is, in this sense, an



eternal “best seller”, and there are so many more: the anvil chorus, the triumphal march, the brindisi, and so on.

I have always found it interesting that people will ask you whether you like Wagner or not, but when it comes to Verdi they will ask which of Verdi’s works you like the most. Quite a contrast. I recall being interviewed back when I was Chairman of American Institute of Verdi Studies at NYU and being asked which of Verdi’s works was my favorite. It is an impossible question to answer, so I chose a different tack. I said that I could reduce it to scenes or to themes or I could reduce it to moments all across the spectrum of his operas because the field is so rich, so varied, so engaging. Of these, how could anyone resist the tomb scene in AIDA or the father-daughter scenes in Rigoletto, or the opening act of La Traviata, or the council scene in Simon Boccanegra, or Falstaff’s “Quando ero paggio...” which lasts for a little more than a minute but sets the listener reeling with its comic intensity, or almost any part of his masterpiece Otello. And then, the “Va pensiero.” It is a supermarket of infinite delights which, to the frequentee, will often seem so familiar that it is taken for granted and yet, like a happy shopper becoming dependent and getting hungrier as he shops, he takes the delights from the shelves and enjoys them again and again and yet again.

Verdi’s place in the world of opera is unmistakable; his place in the world of music, equally unmistakable, his place in the theatre of Western Civilization most enduring and his works’ place in our sensibilities, life-long. Viva Verdi!

* Steve Acunto is Chairman of the Italian Academy Foundation, Inc., sponsor of the Carnegie Hall celebration featuring I Cameristi della Scala on Verdi’s birthday, October 10th. He is past Chairman of the American Institute for Verdi Studies at NYU, closely associated with the NYU Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, on whose Board he serves.

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