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Expressions of vocality in romantic opera. Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner

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Abstract: *The vocal discourse found in the romantic opera complements the new philosophical and spiritual concepts following the development of the vocal technique of the opera singers. While a large number of roles could be explored in those terms, the demands placed upon body and voice are individual and each role of every opera is always distinct; Verdi and Wagner roles provide particularly valuable examples because of the complex intersection between a rich psychological framework for interpretative engagement and a complex vocal and bodily collaboration. The characters created in the works of Verdi and Wagner fit into new vocal and dramaturgical typologies influenced by the style of the French opera.*

Key-words: *opera, vocality, stylistic features, romanticism*

1. Introduction

Voice fascinates and seduces. It is of us and yet not. A paradox, it extends our bodies into space, and can manifest our most hidden feelings. It is all pervasive. We talk about voice in many ways, both metaphorical and literal: the style of an author or poet is their "voice"; individuals or groups of people can have a voice. Used in myriads of ways, the voice has been scrutinized from many perspectives since antiquity, and the effect of its heightened use by way of chanting, orating, shouting, incanting and singing still intrigues and disturbs today. Aspects of vocality are presented in a novel way in the romantic work, combining new styles and philosophical concepts. Composers such as Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner open new horizons in the development of musical discourse, thus developing the vocal technique of opera singers. Works such as *Lohengrin*, *Jerusalem*, *I vespri siciliani*, *Don Carlos*, justly reproduce the stylistic aspects of the vocality in the romantic opera. "The way we experience our world as a comprehensive reality involves our whole being…It is the way we are meaningfully situated in our world through our bodily interactions, our cultural Institutions our linguistic tradition, and our historical context."

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2. Verdi and Wagner. Stylistic features

In the winter months of 1850 Richard Wagner found himself once again in Paris – and not for the last time – with the aim of improving his fame and fortune. Around the middle of February he heard a performance of Meyerbeer's latest sensation, *Le prophete*, which had received its premiere ten months earlier (16 April 1849), although the origins of the work stretch back to the 1830s. "In his autobiography Wagner recounts how he noisily exited the theatre in revulsion at the stock operatic roulades to which the false prophet's mother, Fides, pours out her grief in the famous Act IV finale[2]. " In this new opera he perceived the 'ruins' of all the noble aspirations of the 1848 revolution; he read it as a sign of the complete moral and aesthetic bankruptcy of the French provisional government, the 'dawning of a shameful day of disillusionment' for art, society and politics alike. For Wagner, a rather more hopeful dawn was soon to be signaled by the premiere of his own *Lohengrin* under Franz Liszt's direction at Weimar in August 1850, if under musical conditions rather less auspicious than those enjoyed by *Le prophete in Paris*. According to a tradition Wagnerian – historiographical perspective, these two works mark the crossroads of (Parisian) grand opera and (Wagnerian) music drama, a crucial choice facing composers of opera after themiddle of the century. A comparison of the two works, however, could just as well demonstrate the deep roots of Wagner's music drama in the musical dramaturgy of French grand opera, roots that are still conspicuously exposed in *Tannhauser* and *Lohengrin*.

Verdi, too, had been spending time in Paris in the years just prior to 1850. His grand-operatic redaction of I Lombardi, as Jerusalem, introduced him to the audience of the Opera towards the end of 1847, and he returned to the French capital for some months during each of the following two years. Unlike Wagner, Verdi would succeed in producing several original works for the Paris stage (*Les vepres siciliennes*, 1855, and *Don Carlos*, 1867) in addition to several adaptations of Italian works. The turn from heroic to ordinary, from painting the characters and feelings of simple people, had been sketched in Verdi's works since the end of the fifth decade of the nineteenth century. "From here comes this unusual character of the construction of numbers, this disregard of conventionalism, this disdain for the laws of the form of old books. From here comes the originality, the boldness and the freedom that is attributed to the old forms, the novelty of the details in Verdi's works."[3]

The development of compositional style of these two composers in the context of the history of singing at the time when vocal technique adapted to both singer and composer, has a fascinating synchronicity. Whereas most mid-nineteenth-century composers wrote for singers

[2] Wagner R. *My Life*, trans. Andrew, Gray Cambridge, 1983, p. 436.

[3] Escudier L. *Mes souvenirs*. trans. fr. E. Dentu Libraire – Editeur, Paris, 1868, p. 75

Within the capabilities of the singers with which they were familiar, Verdi and Wagner created a hothouse for technical development of the voice in opera by challenging their artists both vocally and dramatically.

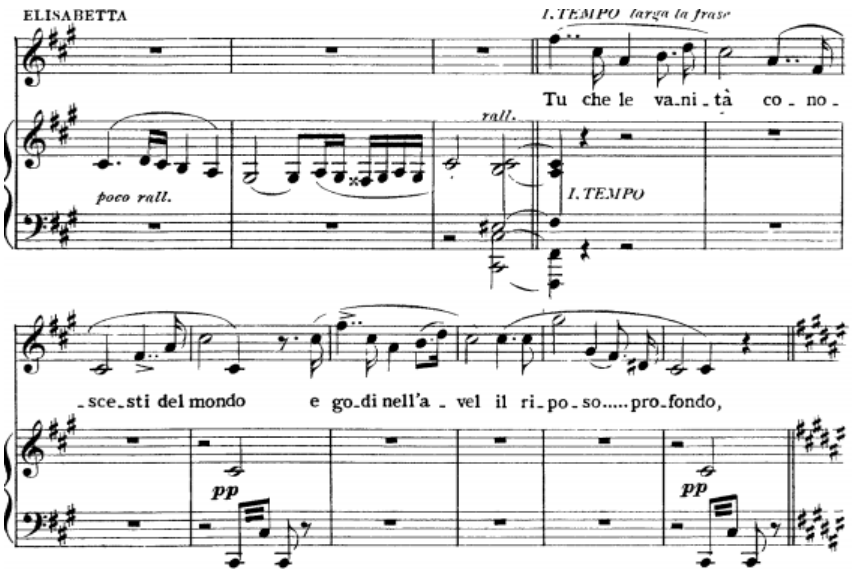

Fig. 1. *Elisabeta's aria from opera "Don Carlos*"

3. Particularities of voice technique

Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner are widely known for their transformative impact on operatic composition. Much less widely discussed, and arguably more important, is their impact on the style of operatic vocality. A comparative study of the vocality of these two composers provides a stimulating juxtaposition and poses a number of interesting questions relevant to the voice embodiment. There is a considerable amount of critical literature surrounding the History and aesthetics of the two composers: indeed, comparison of Verdi and Wagner seems to spawn its own mini---field of musicology. However, there is scant in---depth discussion of their compositional processes for the voice and descriptions of the vocality; if the differences in singing the music of each are taken for granted by many

practitioners, a clear elucidation of these differences should nevertheless be illuminating to both the singer and scholar.

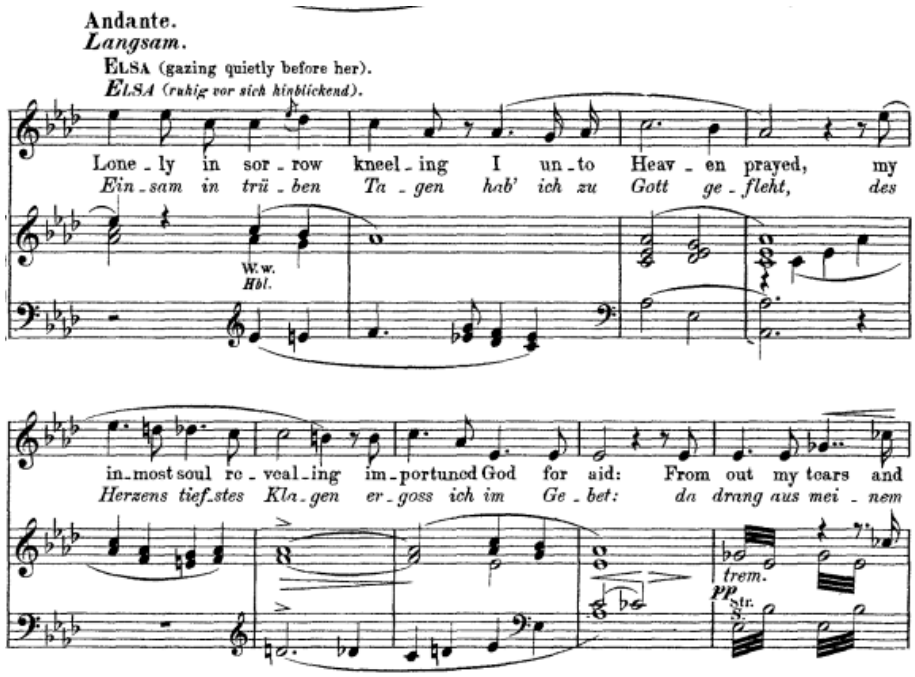

Fig. 2. *Elsa's aria from opera "Lohengrin"*

Enlarging and explaining these ideas, I will move beyond theoretical conceptions to apply those technical concepts to the general vocality of Verdi and Wagner. In conclusion, I will contrast the two styles of vocality and note similarities and differences in approaches, demonstrating how those demands are met, and touch on the elusive concept of *jouissance*[4]. Wagner, very much influenced by the performances of Wilhemine Schroder-Devrient, wrote, it seems, for his „ideal singer".[5] That their compositions pushed the boundaries of musical and dramatic interaction in part explains why the music of both Verdi and Wagner was initially claimed to be voice wrecking: Verdi was called The "Attila of the Voice" and Wagner's singers complained bitterly about the length of his operas.[6]

[4] In this context, the fulfillment of the interpretative requirements

[5] Grey S. Thomas, "Wilhelmine Schroder---Devrient and Wagner's Dresden", *Richard Wagner and his World* ed. Thomas Grey (Princeton: Princeton, 2009), p. 201-229.

[6] Celletti R. *History of Bel Canto* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991,1977); Verdi also remarked in a letter to Salvatore Cammarano (May 3 1844) that "I am accused of liking a lot of noise and neglecting the singers" (*Verdi: The Man in his Letters,* ed, Franz Werfel and Paul Stefan (1942)(New York: Vienna House, 1973), 109; Richard Wagner, *Actors and Singers*, trans. W. Ashton Ellis (London: University of Nebraska Press

The vocal demands of works like *Jerusalem*, *I vespri siciliani*, *Don Carlos*, *Lohengrin* are similar, the singers having to play thruthfully the dramatic message. The vocal amplitude and the dark timbre are found in the works of both composers, but partially preserving the old belcanto traditions. The same type of vocality is also found in *Jerusalem* (role of Hélène), *I vespri siciliani* (role of Elena) and *Don Carlos* (role of Elisabetta). The style of the grand opera is felt in these works through the construction of the vocal, wide and solemn speech. Singable and full of emphasis, the vocal discourse penetrates beyond the barriers of time.

Through the new way of vocal approach in the opera of Verdi and Wagner, a new singing school is developing. Generally, the vocal teaching prior to the nineteenth century promoted the vocal characteristics that are today largely attributed to the tonal concept of the "Italian style" of singing, for example: *legato, sostenuto*, facility in *coloratura* and unification of the vocal registers. This style was exported all around Europe and held up as a paradigm: even in Mozart's day, this form of Italianate opera singing was the model. James Stark comments that "most of these earlier treatises stay firmly within the confines of technical exercises". [7]These texts require specialist knowledge to interpret, and while there are many explanations of stylistic considerations, expectations of ornamentation and crucial issues about treatment of text and of rhythm, there is no explanation of *how* one makes the sound.

4. Conclusions

In engaging with the expression of operatic singers, I have sought to explain the elusive and compelling quality of voice that transfixes the listener. An embodiment that is fully centred on and encapsulates vocal performance is an enacted and sung set of meanings carried out in real time. The commitment to singing the roles of Verdi and Wagner in the way I have investigated here results in a powerfully original creativeact. There is a theory that music and words convey emotion and story in operatic singing. As surveys have shown, a low percentage of words are understood in performance, soone must deduce that the music must be the main conveyor of emotion. However, I

1995) 209. Wagner was horribly upset by the early death of his favourite tenor, Ludwig Schnorr a few weeks after the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde,* and especially as many people attributed the Cause of his death to the overwork of singing the extremely long and taxing role of Tristan.

[7] Stark J. *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, 93-95 presents an excellent overview of the early treatises, as does Berton Coffin's *Historical Vocal Pedagogy Classics* (Maryland:The Scarecrow Press, 2002); The *messa di voce* is where the singer crescendos and diminuendos on a single note, with a perfect tone balance; *fiorature* are the fast runs and figures, needing much practise. As they were not written in the score, the exercises were often added by the singer; hence the singer needing musical training for the creation as well as execution.

contend that the voice itself conveys as much information and emotion about the character and their emotions as his or her text and music provides.

The invisibility of the work of the voice and the body is problematic for any outside observer (it is a rare scholar who understands the intricacies and risk of performance) who is not helped by the fact that singers engaged in this work very rarely articulate what they do. And yet, by viewing singing from the inside, as this research has done, both performers and scholars can come to a much more nuanced understanding of both composers' works and how singers' voices and bodies assist the composer in ways that can transform the listening and performing experience.

While focusing solely on the fugitive voice in this case and its ability to take one over, Barthes reiterates the intangibility of the voice and its effects in a live performance. Opera singers have long accepted that there is some quality about the human singing voice that is "uncanny" "wild" or "ineffable", but do not emphasise that it is the "liveness" that enhances these memorable aspects of voice. The notion of the ineffable qualities of voice itself have become the focus of a number of scholars intrigued with the nature of live operatic experience.

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