

Teaching Italian Opera from the metrical functions of the libretto: The “ESTRO-VERSO” competition experience at the Conservatoire of Terni (Italy)

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Abstract: *In the librettos of Italian operas, characters often associate precise metrical functions with certain personal features. For example, comical or low-class characters express themselves in octosyllables (verses with a hammered rhythm pattern), while serious and more socially important characters prefer the nobler septenaries (verses with mobile accents). There are also exceptions, which can be explained according to specific dramaturgical situations. These metrical differences have an impact on the musical development of the sung poetry. In fact, students at the Conservatoire should always be aware of the close connection between poetry and music. For this reason, I have just devised the first national competition based on Italian metrics, called “ESTRO-VERSO” (‘ESplora e TROva il VERSO giusto’ = ‘Explore and find the right verse’). It will take place during the academic year 2024/25 at the Conservatoire “Giulio Briccialdi” of Terni (Italy).*

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1. Introduction: Managing metrics and prosody

Thanks to my experience as a *Poetry for Music and Musical Dramaturgy* teacher at the Conservatoire, I realised that students should always understand and discuss the *metrical form* of the texts sung for music. This deep comprehension is essential to better penetrate the texts’ intrinsic meaning, that is, what is implied, not explicit.

Metrics is the discipline that regulates the length of poetic verse, which since the Middle Ages has not been measured by counting the number of grammatical syllables contained in verse, but rather by evaluating the sound quality

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of the minimum units of verses, the metrical syllables.² This is true for every sung language, and entails, at least on the part of singers and composers, the acquisition of the metrical-poetic competence indispensable for being able to speculate on musical dramaturgy and creative intentions, more or less uncovered, implicit in the work of both the poet who gives shape to the text, and the musician who covers it with notes.

Thus, the poet's work not only has to do with the semantic (i.e. meaningful) aspect of the text, but also with the metrical and accentual quality of the verses he composes. It follows that, in order to compose music over a poetic text, the musician must primarily follow the rhythmic track prepared by the poet through his verses. It can even be said that some of the 'implicit' or 'unconscious' meaning of a text proposed by a poet is already contained in his choice to dress it metrically in one way or another, a choice that relies on the stressed sonority of the syllables of the chosen verses, that is, on their *prosody*. In fact, prosody governs the correct accentuation of each word, and consequently, it also concerns verses, that is, linear sequences of words lined up by the poet. The composer's respect for the specific prosody of the text he must set to music is, therefore, indispensable: only if there is a coincidence between the prosody of the verses and the musical rhythm superimposed on them will it be possible to obtain the correct sung pronunciation of the words lined up by the poet.

Poets almost always respect the correct prosody of the chosen language, deviating only in exceptional cases to achieve deliberately emphatic or comical aesthetic results. Correct prosody is therefore fundamental in poetry, because, as in spoken language, if words are accented in an anomalous way, the understanding of what is written or said is compromised. We all recognise the meaning of words not only because we correctly identify their sequence of letters and syllables, but also because we recognise their correct accentuation. In this respect, the confusion that can arise between heteronyms (= words written in the same way but with different meanings) is typical, such as the English word spelled "digest": we say 'daɪdʒɛst'³ if we mean 'collection, selection' (the "reader's digest", for example), but we pronounce it daɪ'dʒɛst if we refer to the action of 'digesting food'. The same applies to the word "conflict", which we stress as 'kɒnflɪkt if we mean the noun 'argument, quarrel', and kən'flɪkt if we refer to the verb that means 'being in disagreement'.

² Classical metrics was instead based on a quantitative approach, that is, it counted the number of syllables in a verse by measuring their duration (long syllables / short syllables) according to fixed patterns (feet and metres).

³ I use here the fonts of the International Phonetic Alphabet.

2. The Poet’s laboratory: Inside a libretto

Therefore, the composer must respect the correct accentuation of the words of every text he sets to music if he wants it to be correctly perceived by his audience. And this is why, today as in the past, musicians must manage metrics, which *includes* the necessary prosodic competence. It should be added that the verbal sonority impressed by the *rhymes* of a poetic text is also a prosodic element of great importance, capable of influencing many composer’s musical choices.

Words, verses, and rhyme stresses are not the only parameters governing the work of poets. They must also choose which metre to use for their verses from time to time, that is, which *length* to give them, a parameter that also involves the choice of their own specific internal accentual sound. And it also happens that poets use variable metres within the same work, as is the case of an opera libretto. Certainly, this happens for the sake of variety, but it is not the only reason. In fact, for example, one of the greatest poetic masterpieces of all time, Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*,⁴ was composed entirely using hendecasyllables. Metrical variety is therefore not indispensable to the work of a poet.

If a poet writes an opera libretto, he must technically differentiate the poetic areas of *recitatives* from those in which the characters sing solo *arias*, *duets*, *tercets*, and other ensemble pieces (*introductions*, *finales*, etc.). The poet for music uses so-called ‘loose verse’ for recitatives (which contain verses with variable internal accentuations, with an almost prosaic flow) and ‘lyrical verse’ for solo or ensemble areas with a more regular rhythmic flow such as arias (which contain verses with regularly repeated internal accents). But is there some other hidden meaning governing metrical variety in opera, where such variety would not be indispensable? To try to answer this question, it is necessary to trespass into the field of *musical dramaturgy*, a discipline that I consider strongly connected to the metrics of texts for music.

Limiting my discussion here to Italian opera librettos of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, I realised that serious and comic characters are often characterised by precise metrical functions associated with certain of their personal, emotional, or sentimental features. For example, comical or low-class characters usually express themselves in octosyllables (verses with a hammered rhythm pattern), while serious and more socially important characters prefer the

⁴ The *Divine Comedy* is a poem in ‘terza rima’ (= hendecasyllable tercets with ‘chained’ rhymes), composed in the first half of the fourteenth century, which recounts an allegorical journey of the poet in the afterlife according to the Thomistic theological vision. The work is divided into three parts: *Hell*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. The poem is studied by all students attending every type of Italian secondary school.

nobler septenaries (verses with mobile accents within them). There are also interesting exceptions to these situations, which can be explained by analysing the dramaturgical situations that justify them. These metrical differences inevitably have an impact on the musical development of the poetry in each opera. In fact, with his music, the composer generally follows the strong and weak accentuation of the verses by tracing their rhythmic conformation. But in doing so, the musician adds an additional layer of aesthetic meanings on top of that already internal to the text, which sometimes coincides with the meanings implicit in the verse form, and sometimes appears to be independent. In this paper, however, I will neglect to elaborate on this aspect.

3. Example No. 1: Don Giovanni seduces Zerlina

To clarify what I mean, I propose the metrical analysis of two famous opera passages as case studies, taken from the same two-act opera buffa, *Don Giovanni* (1787) by Lorenzo Da Ponte and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

We begin with the famous duet between Don Giovanni and Zerlina (I,9) *Là ci darem la mano* ('There we will hold hands'): see Table 1.

Metre	Character(s)	Verse	English Translation
Septenaries	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	Là ci darem la mano,	<i>There we will hold hands,</i>
		là mi dirai di sì;	<i>there you will say yes to me;</i>
		vedi, non è lontano,	<i>you see, it's not far,</i>
		partiam, ben mio, da qui.	<i>let's go, my dear, from here.</i>
	<i>Zerlina</i>	Vorrei e non vorrei,	<i>I would like to and I would not like to,</i>
		mi trema un poco il cor;	<i>my heart trembles a little,</i>
		felice, è ver, sarei,	<i>I would indeed be happy,</i>
		ma può burlarmi ancor.	<i>but he can mock me still.</i>
	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	Vieni, mio bel diletto.	<i>Come, my lovely delight.</i>
	<i>Zerlina</i>	Mi fa pietà Masetto.	<i>Masetto takes pity on me.</i>
	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	Io cangerò tua sorte.	<i>I will change your fate.</i>
	<i>Zerlina</i>	Presto non son più forte.	<i>Quickly I cannot resist any longer.</i>
	<i>a due</i>	Andiam, andiam, mio bene,	<i>Let's go, let's go, my love,</i>
		a ristorar le pene	<i>to redeem the sufferings</i>
		d'un innocente amor.	<i>of an innocent love.</i>

Table 1. Lorenzo Da Ponte, "*Là ci darem la mano*" (from "*Il dissoluto punito, ossia il Don Giovanni*", I,9)

The nobleman Don Giovanni tries to seduce the peasant girl Zerlina on the day of her wedding to Masetto. He acts by speaking to her in septenaries, the metre typically used by nobles, thus treating her as an equal, flattering her, and deceiving her into thinking she is his equal in society thanks to the form of his language, as well as by the content of his courtship. Furthermore, Don Giovanni addresses Zerlina by imposingly stressing the first metrical syllable of his first three septenaries, mimicking his imperative seductive intention, especially with the force of the initial ictus⁵ (/ --- / -): “**L**à ci darem la **m**àno, | **l**à mi dirai di **s**ì; | **v**édi, non è lon**t**àno”. His strong-willed mood is softened only in the fourth septenary, which proposes the initial upbeat stress instead of downbeat on the verb designating Don Giovanni and Zerlina as a couple, and ends downbeat with a truncated ending (- / --- /): “**p**art**i**à**m**, ben mio, da **q**u**i**”.

It seems very interesting to me that Zerlina replies by keeping the septenaries as a communicative code, mimicking the initial rhythm of the fourth verse pronounced by Don Giovanni (- / --- /): “**V**orr**è**i e non vorr**è**i, | mi **t**r**è**ma un poco il **c**òr; | fel**i**ce, è ver, sar**è**i, | ma **p**uò burlà**m**i ancòr”. Speaking in septenaries, the girl aligns herself with Don Giovanni, dreaming of a life as a noblewoman alongside her bold suitor, maintaining the upbeat accentuation proposed by the word ‘Partià**m**’, with which for the first time he hints at a communion of intentions with her. But Zerlina prefers a flat termination (upbeat) for her septenaries, breaking away from Don Giovanni’s willing truncated termination and thus revealing a certain distrust of the insinuating seducer. The rhythm of the upbeat septenaries, that is, with a strong stroke on the second metric syllable, is maintained in all the verses that reveal Zerlina’s uncertainty, and even when the two lovers move apart in an embrace to enjoy their mutual intimacy (“Andià**m**, andiam, mio **b**ène | a r**i**stora**r** le **p**éne | d’un **i**nnocente amòr”).

Ultimately, Don Giovanni needed only the first four septenaries to seduce Zerlina: three beginning downbeat, and the last, more relaxed, starting on the upbeat. The rhythm of the latter type of septenary is imitated first by Zerlina’s verses, and then by the two characters together, ‘a due’, sanctioning the sonorous and rhythmic agreement of Da Ponte’s poem among the two, even before the sonorous and rhythmic agreement of Mozart’s music. The lulling musical progression of the final ‘a due’ part of the duet mirrors the ecstatic atmosphere of the conclusion of the courtship, sanctioned by its evident success.

⁵ Ictus = “/”; not stressed syllable = “_”.

4. Example No. 2: Don Giovanni Is Disturbed by Masetto

My second example is taken from a section of the Finale of Act I (*concertato*) of the same opera. Scene I,18 is emblematic: here, Don Giovanni, a nobleman who loves to collect conquests of women of all kinds, tries to seduce the peasant girl Zerlina for the second time, again on her wedding day with the peasant Masetto (see Table 2).

Metre	Character(s)	Verse	English Translation
octosyllables	<i>Zerlina</i>	Tra quest'arbori celata	<i>Among these bushes, I will hide myself,</i>
		si può dar che non mi veda.	<i>perhaps he won't see me.</i>
	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	Zerlinetta mia garbata,	<i>Zerlina, my lovely,</i>
		t'ho già visto, non scappar.	<i>I've seen you, don't run away.</i>
	<i>Zerlina</i>	Ah lasciatemi andar via.	<i>Oh, please, let me go.</i>
	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	No no resta, gioia mia.	<i>No, no, stay, joy of my life.</i>
	<i>Zerlina</i>	Se pietade avete in core...	<i>If there's pity in your heart...</i>
	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	Si ben mio, son tutto amore.	<i>Yes, my dear, I'm full of love.</i>
		Vieni un poco in questo loco	<i>Come over here for just a moment</i>
		fortunata io ti vo' far.	<i>I want to make you lucky.</i>
	<i>Zerlina</i>	Ah, s'ei vede il sposo mio,	<i>Oh, if he sees my husband,</i>
		so ben io quel che può far.	<i>I know well what he will do.</i>
septenaries	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	Masetto!	<i>Masetto!</i>
	<i>Masetto</i>	Si Masetto.	<i>Yes, Masetto.</i>
	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	E chiuso là perché?	<i>Hiding in there? What for?</i>
		La bella tua Zerlina	<i>Your beautiful Zerlina</i>
		non può, la poverina,	<i>cannot, poor girl, stay</i>
		più star senza di te.	<i>any longer without you.</i>
	<i>Masetto</i>	Capisco sì signore.	<i>I understand, sir, indeed I do.</i>
	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	Adesso fate core.	<i>Now cheer up, both of you.</i>

Metre	Character(s)	Verse	English Translation
		I suonatori udite:	<i>Listen to the musicians:</i>
		venite omai con me.	<i>Now come along with me.</i>
	<i>Masetto e Zerlina</i>	Sì sì, facciamo core	<i>Yes, yes, let us cheer up</i>
		ed a ballar cogli altri	<i>and let's go and dance with the others</i>
		andiamo tutti tre.	<i>all three of us.</i>

Table 2. Lorenzo Da Ponte, “Tra quest’arbori celata” (from “Il dissoluto punito, ossia il Don Giovanni”, I,18)

Why does the dialogue between Zerlina and Don Giovanni begin in octosyllabic lines and remain that way only until Masetto appears? In serious and comic opera, octosyllabic verses are typical of the way peasants and servants express themselves. And it is Zerlina who proposes the poetic metre here; Don Giovanni, as a skilled suitor, indulges her to calm her predictable restlessness mimicking her communicative style. In such a way, Don Giovanni shows his emotional solidarity. He, therefore, maintains the octosyllables proposed by her, and even traces the endings of Zerlina’s verses with his rhymes. At the same time, the gentleman makes his seductive approaches more and more explicit.

But Masetto unexpectedly appears to break the spell, and it is therefore inevitable that the poetic metre changes, as an effect of the changed situation: suddenly, septenaries appear, as a spontaneous metre set by the shocked Don Giovanni. Septenaries are the verses in which the nobles speak to each other, but here the implicit effect of the metrical change is clear: Don Giovanni, extremely irritated by the disruption of his seductive plans, resumes speaking without any conciliatory intention. He looks down on Masetto, addressing him as a nobleman speaking to a peasant to intimidate him and make him feel socially inferior. Mozart reinforces the effect of the sudden metric shift, which sanctions the sudden change of atmosphere, by introducing a sudden modulation from F major to D minor.

5. Conclusions: The “ESTRO-VERSO” competition

In conclusion, both the examples presented here are only meant to clarify how eloquent the metrical aspect of a sung text is in itself, regardless of the musical coating applied to it. I hope, therefore, that it becomes clear how important it is, at least for students who have to deal with sung texts (singers, conductors, choir directors), to master the principles of poetic metrics to be able to independently

analyse the texts they are dealing with from a technical point of view. In fact, I have always taught Italian metrics to my students from the very first lesson, to make them aware of the close formal connection between poetry and music in sung texts.

To spread awareness of this indisputable interrelationship, and to motivate my students as much as possible, I devised the first competition based on Italian metrics among conservatoire students, at the bachelor's and master's levels. It is called "ESTRO-VERSO" (*'ESplora e TROva il VERSO giusto'* = 'Explore and find the right verse'), and will debut during this academic year at my Conservatoire of Terni, first in a local form in a few weeks, and then in a national version during the spring. Participation in the competition will be allowed individually and in little teams, and will imply the presence of written and oral tests. We will award symbolic prizes (cups and plaques), but I hope that, when the students winning the competition become established professionals, they will remember the "ESTRO VERSO" experience and put it to the service of their own students. I always tell my students that good metric skills will enable them to be more autonomous in their work as singers, choir conductors, and orchestra conductors. Moreover, I am convinced that knowing what an opera libretto looks like internally is equally useful for instrumentalists who play opera music in an orchestra, because they can better realise why rhythms and melodies change.

I think that it would be very useful if the "ESTRO-VERSO" competition would cross Italian borders in the future, and stimulate also foreign students interested in Italian opera. A better awareness of metrics and prosody provides particular keys to penetrating both the creative intentions of poet and musician and the aesthetic effects achieved by both resonating in listeners. Ultimately, it is a matter of 'feeling' rhythm and sonority of the poetic language, and of considering these two elements as fundamental as the musical coating that covers it.

6. References

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