

# The Rhythm of Text and Music in *Ottocento* Melody: An Empirical Reassessment in Light of Contemporary Treatises

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Theoretical discussions of textual declamation in operas have a long history, dating back as far as the forward to Peri's *Euridice* (1601), and in Italy they continued to appear well into the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> At least three writers—Giuseppe Baini, Bonifazio Asioli, and Carlo Ritorni—dealt at length with various aspects of the text-music relationship as they attempted to demonstrate a precise correspondence between poetic and musical rhythm in contemporary opera.<sup>2</sup> Baini insisted that “music and poetry are alike in their number [of beats and syllables], in their proportions and symmetry, in their indefinitely extended succession of corresponding . . . musical and poetic accents, [and] in their uniform repetition of poetic feet [which are] similarly proportioned to the uniform repetitions of musical beats.”<sup>3</sup> Asioli pressed the same point even more emphatically, arguing that “one can say that the musical phrases are *decasillabe, novenarie, ottonarie, settenarie*, etc.”<sup>4</sup> Ritorni provided the most detailed conceptualization of this relationship, although, unlike his colleagues, he took pains to distinguish proper textual declamation in contemporary opera from the fusion of textual and musical expression allegedly achieved by the ancient Greeks in their dramas.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, two important studies have approached these same issues through empirical examination of the *ottocento* repertory: Robert Moreen's dissertation on textual and musical form in Verdi's early operas, and Friedrich Lippmann's study of textual and musical rhythm in late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Italian opera.<sup>6</sup> Moreen and Lippmann viewed rhythmic aspects of the text-music relationship from opposite perspectives. Moreen concentrated on musical metric accent and its relationship to poetic scansion, that is, the placement of poetic accents within measures, without specific regard for note-to-note melodic rhythms. In contrast, Lippmann's narrower, yet more exhaustive study of melodies from Mozart through Verdi attempts to categorize musical rhythmic motives and to attribute their occurrences to characteristics of various poetic meters. Despite this important difference, in more than a decade since these studies first appeared—perhaps because neither was published as a book—no one has seriously reviewed their implications or tried to assess the validity of their theses, to reconcile their diverging approaches, or to compare their conclusions with contemporary formulations.

In the following pages, my attempt at such an assessment will lead me to propose a new approach for understanding poetic and musical rhythm in *ottocento* opera. We will see that the writings of Baini, Asioli, and Ritorni, while sometimes contradictory and often problematic, provide invaluable clarification of *ottocento* text-setting practices, revealing complexities that we have not previously considered. In doing so, they contribute a necessary contemporary point of reference from which we can evaluate Moreen's and Lippmann's contrasting hypotheses and open new avenues of empirical investigation that enable us to refine present-day views of the text-music relationship.

\* \* \*

Moreen has proposed several relatively simple rules that he believes shaped both the construction of Italian verses and composers' settings of those verses. In his view, each poetic meter follows a characteristic organization in which certain syllables within each line are accented and others unaccented. This summary of *ottocento* patterns of accentuation is given in column 1 of table 1.<sup>7</sup> Moreen divided these accents into two categories. The *accento comune*, which falls on the penultimate syllable of *piano* (ordinary) lines or the final syllable of *tronco* (truncated) lines and the antepenultimate syllable of *sdrucchiolo* (extended or, literally, slippery) lines, occurs in all meters and is never omitted.<sup>8</sup> Other, "secondary" accents, Moreen argued, vary from meter to meter, their consistency from one line to the next depending on whether the meter is even-numbered or odd-numbered: they are constant in even-numbered meters, but may change from line to line in odd-numbered meters. According to Moreen, composers always aligned the *accento comune* with a musical accent but did not always provide stress for secondary poetic accents.

Baini's, Asioli's, and Ritorni's discussions of Italian text-setting all support Moreen's position in the broadest sense, since they too focus on accentual relationships between poetry and music and concur in most cases with his summary of the various patterns of accentuation.<sup>9</sup> Yet their views also differ to varying degrees from Moreen's formulation.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Moreen, none of these theorists mentioned *binario* as a viable meter for operatic poetry. Asioli stated that meters having three- and four-syllable lines were "rare," a point on which Baini and Ritorni seem to have agreed, since neither mentioned those meters. Ritorni noted further that *novenario* was little used, deeming it too "prosaic" (*prosaico*), and argued that "what is not first melodious in poetry cannot be [so] in music."<sup>11</sup> In addition, these writers implied that certain meters (e.g., *quinario* and *settenario*) were more regular in their scansion than Moreen has indicated, by recogniz-

**Table 1**  
Accented Syllables in Italian Poetic Meters

Meter	Moreen	Baini	Asioli	Ritorni
Binario	1			
Ternario	2			
Quaternario	3			
Quinario	1 or 2, 4	1, 4	4 (1 or 2)	4
Senario	2, 5	2, 5	2, 5	2, 5
Setternario	1, 2, 3, or 4, and 6	2, 4, 6; 4, 6	4, 6; 2, 4, 6; (2, 6)	4, 6; (3, 6)
Ottonario	3, 7	3, 7	3, 7, (5)	3, 7
Novenario	2 or 3, 5, 8	2, 5, 8; 4, 8	3, 5, 8	
Decasillabo	3, 6, 9	3, 6, 9	3, 6, 9	3, 6, 9
Endecasillabo	6, 10; 4, 8, 10; 4, 7, 10	6, 10; 4, 6, 8, 10; 4, 7, 10	6, 10; 4, 8, 10; 4, 6, 8, 10	6, 10; 4, 8, 10 (4, 6, 8, 10) (4, 7, 10)

ing a smaller number of normal accents. At the same time, numerous inconsistencies among these three theorists concerning the importance of specific accents and the number of acceptable treatments of individual meters demonstrates that the conventions of poetic accentuation were not uniform in every detail (table 1).

Ritorni's discussion, which provides the most explicit conceptualization of principles of textual accentuation seen in these three treatises, also diverges from Moreen's viewpoint in several more fundamental respects. First, Ritorni indicated that certain accents other than the *accento comune* have fixed positions in meters of six syllables or more, including the odd-numbered ones: "We form the line itself all in one piece, like [a] big poetic [foot], with the *longs disposed in certain fixed positions*" (my emphasis). (Ritorni's long syllables are given in table 1.)<sup>12</sup> Ritorni specifically addressed the issue of variable patterns of accentuation in *settenari*, arguing that most variants were atypical, and could inevitably be heard in terms of the standard arrangement with an *obbligato* accent on the fourth syllable (*settenario di quarta*). Commenting on "settenario di terza, in tripla," for which he cited as an example the line "Con sospir mi rimembra," he held that "in lyric songs proper the poet rejects it, because it fails to sustain the melody and breaks it up; and the musician could reject it, because it would mix triple and duple meter."<sup>13</sup>

In further contrast to Moreen, Ritorni distinguished not two, but three types of accents. Two of these are *accenti obbligati*, which are consistent from line to line within a given meter: (1) the accent on the penultimate syllable common to all meters (in Ritorni's words, "the indispensable final accent" ("l'ultimo accento indispensabile")); this is the equivalent of Moreen's *accento comune*, a term also used by Asioli); and (2) other accents that typify individual meters and always appear within those meters. The third type comprises *accenti casuali*, which can vary in their position from line to line within a given meter.<sup>14</sup>

Ritorni's distinctions partly explain the disagreements among the three theorists regarding the accentuation of various meters: Ritorni considered only the *accenti obbligati*, while Bainsi and Asioli also included the most typical *accenti casuali* (without noting the differences). Ritorni's designation of *accenti casuali* also helps us to refine Moreen's assertion that meters having lines with odd numbers of syllables—and only those meters—may incorporate patterns of accentuation which vary from line to line. Since Italian poetic rules did not allow accents on consecutive syllables, and since in most meters the necessary *obbligato* accents are separated by at most two unaccented syllables (see table 1), *accenti casuali*, if they occur, must come before the *obbligato* accents in each line.<sup>15</sup> (*Ottionario* is the one exception to this rule, since the location of its *obbligato* accents on syllables 3 and 7 allows an *accento casuale* to fall in the middle of the line, on syllable 5.) In three of the odd-numbered meters (*quinario*, *settenario*, and *endecasillabo*), the first *obbligato* accent appears on the fourth syllable. Therefore, in these three cases, an *accento casuale* may fall on either the first or the second syllable. In meters having even numbers of syllables, however, the series of *obbligato* accents begins with either the second or the third syllable, preventing the occurrence of an *accento casuale* on the second syllable and allowing an *accento casuale* to fall on the first syllable only in *ottonario* and *decasillabo*.

In sum, variable non-obligatory accents may occur in a wider variety of situations than Moreen has acknowledged; that is, not only in odd-numbered meters: changing patterns of accentuation from line to line may occur in all meters except for *senario*. However, in even-numbered meters, such changes result merely from including or omitting *accenti casuali*. Only in odd-numbered meters can *accenti casuali* actually shift between the first and second syllables of consecutive lines. Consequently, although *accenti casuali* may appear in both even- and odd-numbered meters, they can produce a more audible and telling effect in the latter, since those meters provide the only opportunities for true fluctuations between conflicting patterns of accentuation.

Nineteenth-century discussions further contrast with Moreen's position by asserting that the characteristic accents of the poetic meter (*accenti caratteristici* or *accenti obbligati*) always receive musical stress: "the characteristic accent corresponds to an accented note."<sup>16</sup> As a corollary to this principle, Ritorni held that *accenti casuali* are not truly representative of a meter and therefore should not receive musical accentuation. Although he made this point in reference to *quinario*, it clearly had a more general application: "if ever . . . [either in *quinario*] or in other meters (my emphasis) musicians demand accents other than the obligatory accents and take into account *accenti casuali*, they exceed the limits of poetry and show that the origins of the two arts are not in accordance."<sup>17</sup> In Ritorni's view, the correspondence between musical and poetic accents begins not at the start of each line, but with the first *accento obbligato*: "the disposition of the accents should not start with [the beginning of] the line, but only at the moment when a downbeat can agree with the first obligatory [poetic] accent."<sup>18</sup>

Ritorni's argument has a bearing on our assessment of melodies in which Verdi and other *ottocento* composers may be presumed to have distorted the accentuation of the text. One example is Zaccaria's "D'Egitto là sui lidi" from act 1 of *Nabucco*, in which Verdi began his setting of the word "Egitto" on a downbeat (example 1).<sup>19</sup> In this case, as in many like it, Verdi's interpretation of the metric form of the poetry is correct by contemporary standards, since it merely ignores an incidental *accento casuale* (on syllable 2). Thus Verdi can hardly be faulted for mishandling the poetic meter, at least in its strictest interpretation. Passages like this one suggest that we should exercise caution when attempting to explain Verdi's rationale for "contradicting" poetic scansion in isolated instances. Although modern listeners might notice such disjunctions, Verdi probably relied on counter-accents "to keep the melody from becoming rhythmically too settled . . . [and] in some other cases . . . to urge the melody on through the tension between text accent and musical accent," much less frequently than Moreen has inferred.<sup>20</sup> Like Ritorni, Verdi and his listeners may in many instances not have heard a textual accent significant enough to produce such a decisive aesthetic effect.

**Example 1.** Verdi, *Nabucco*, act 1.

D'E - git - to là sui li - di

Lippmann's extended study of Italian melodic rhythm in the nineteenth century has prodigiously expanded our understanding of that topic and has paved broad avenues for continued investigation. Particularly in his substantial concluding section (part 3), Lippmann traced long-range trends toward greater uniformity of rhythmic motives in the melodies of Bellini, Donizetti, and early Verdi, toward increasing cohesion between vocal and accompanimental rhythms, toward more uniform phrase lengths within melodies, and toward the more frequent use of syncopation for expressive effect. And he discussed librettists' changing preferences for different poetic meters in various dramatic and formal situations and explains how motivic correspondences between melodies can often be accounted for in terms of the similar scansion of the texts that inspired them, rather than in terms of reminiscence or imitation.

The bulk of Lippmann's article (parts 1 and 2) presents a systematic taxonomy of *ottocento* melodic rhythms, which is laid out in multiple levels of groups and sub-groups. With this taxonomy, Lippmann sought to show a correspondence between the poetic meters of vocal texts and the specific patterns of musical durations to which those texts were set. Unlike Moreen's accent-oriented approach, which is echoed by contemporary theorists, Lippmann's view finds no parallel in their writings. In fact, both Ritorni (in the passage quoted in note 5 above) and Asioli denied the existence of a direct relationship between poetic meter and the patterns of durations in melodic rhythm. Asioli set out his position as follows:

According to the laws of prosody, the long syllable is considered [to have] double the value of the short [one]. But in a musical phrase it is not weighted [so] rigorously, since, always having expressive variety as its aim, [the music] increases or diminishes its duration, with the single precaution of aligning it indispensably with the downbeat. The short syllable, which invariably is found on the weak beats of the measure, sometimes has the value of the long in a fast duple meter, [but] preserves its proper value—or half [that of the long]—in 3/4, 6/8, and 12/8 and falls most frequently in the smaller divisions of the weak beats, which, rushing, so to speak, toward the long syllable and the downbeat, render the accent much more lively and emphatic.<sup>21</sup>

Later, he emphasized the rhythmic diversity possible in different settings of the same poetic meter: “[In setting *decasillabi*] the composer gains an unlimited ability to vary [and] to expand and contract the notes and [thus] the duration[s] of the syllables; [he learns] to imagine for the same meter and words as many diverse phrases as can gush from his fervid fantasy, producing new and growing excitement in the listener.”<sup>22</sup>

Although Lippmann's thesis lacks corroboration by contemporary theorists, it deserves careful consideration from an empirical standpoint, particularly given the massive body of evidence adduced in its support: Lippmann categorized all the melodies of Bellini and Verdi, most of those by Rossini and Donizetti, and many by a host of secondary composers. Unfortunately, such an evaluation is complicated by Lippmann's failure to stipulate precisely the aspect of melodic rhythm that he feels was influenced by poetic meter. That is, he does not say whether verse forms influenced all note-to-note rhythmic relationships or merely the rhythms to which the text is declaimed, two aspects of vocal rhythm that are equivalent only in simple syllabic settings. The title of Lippmann's study implies a focus on note-to-note relationships, as does his argument that the rhythms of instrumental dances grew out of ones already established in vocal music.<sup>23</sup> However, the patterns that characterize his rhythmic sub-groups are in most cases those of textual declamation, not the complete melodic rhythms of his examples. His descriptive headings for these sub-groups fail to clarify his position, since they refer in most cases only to such specific features as the use of an upbeat, a caesura, or syncopation.<sup>24</sup>

In any case, other features of *ottocento* text setting raise further questions regarding the degree to which poetic meter limited the range of musical possibilities. Melodic and declamatory rhythm often vary substantially from phrase to phrase within a single melody, particularly, but not exclusively, in works written early in the century. Lippmann's explanation that these variations represent shifts from subgroup to subgroup within rhythmic families is not particularly helpful, given the profusion of sub-groups that his typology presents. (The number of principal categories, which are further divided into many more sub-categories, ranges from eleven in *quinario* to nineteen in *ottonario*; furthermore, within sub-categories, the rhythms of his examples are seldom identical.) Nor does his argument that these changes constitute responses to fluctuating accents from line to line in such meters as *quinario* and *settenario* seem entirely convincing, since in many cases the adjustments produce no greater consistency of declamation. Lippmann acknowledged that composers often failed to observe *sineresi*—the elision of adjacent vowels in the same word—and *sinalefe*—the elision of adjacent vowels in successive words. Yet he ignored the consequences of these irregularities, even though they cause the actual number of syllables set and their patterns of accentuation to vary from line to line in the same meter. Clearly in these instances—as well as in examples where words truncated by the poet are restored to their original form by the composer—musical factors, and not the scansion of the poetry, determined the composer's choices.

Even if we ignore, for the moment, the difficulties encountered in

applying Lippmann's typology to entire melodies and consider only the initial phrases of those melodies, the plethora of categories and sub-categories comprising the typology, as well as the marked deviations even among divisions within sub-categories, seems to contradict his view of the relationship between text and music. In many cases these variations among rhythmic types result in patterns of rhythmic closure that emphasize different pitches and consequently stress different syllables. Examples 2a and 2b quote representative melodies from the two subdivisions of Lippmann's Group IIIA in *quinario* (melodies that begin on non-accents within the measure in common time).<sup>25</sup> Example 2a provides local rhythmic closure (through motion from short notes to longer ones) and resulting stress on only the fourth and sixth syllables of its first phrase (moving to longer notes for those syllables), while example 2b has, in addition, rhythmic closure on the second syllable. Since in *quinario* the *accenti casuali* normally shift between the first and second syllables (as in example 2b), the second example would contradict in its rhythmic stress those textual accents whenever they fell on the initial syllable of the line (as in the second phrase of example 2b), whereas the first example would not. In short, Lippmann's evidence often fails to support his thesis, suggesting instead that poetic meter played at most a modest role in determining melodic rhythm in *ottocento* opera.

**Example 2a.** Rossini, *La gazza ladra*, act 2.

Allegro

tr

tr

Sa - prò cor - reg - ge-re i miei tra - spor - ti,

**Example 2b.** Rossini, *Tancredi*, act 2.

Allegro

Se il ciel mi gui - da, fau-sto m'ar - ri - da,





In addition, we must categorize related rhythmic motives in terms of the two fundamental elements that create musical stress and non-stress. First, we must consider the position of the musical metric accent (or accents, if the primary accent on the first beat of the measure is accompanied by other, secondary accents) with respect to the textual module. As we have seen, this is the aspect of rhythm that most contemporary theorists emphasized. We must also examine the organization of local rhythmic closure and non-closure, or in the terms proposed by Eugene Narmour, the succession of closed "cumulative" rhythms (short-long), open-ended "counter-cumulative" rhythms (long-short), and non-closed "additive" rhythms (equal durations).<sup>27</sup> Asioli alluded to this secondary function for rhythm when he described unaccented syllables set to short notes rushing toward an enlivened poetic accent. Tables 2a and 2b catalogue the different types of two- and three-note rhythms in duple meter according to these two variables—position of accent and organization of closure and non-closure—and give an example for each category.<sup>28</sup>

Knowing this range of rhythmic possibilities enables us to evaluate composers' treatments of the declamation of *quinari* and *settenari* in  $\frac{2}{4}$ ,  $\frac{4}{4}$ ,  $\mathfrak{C}$ , or  $\mathfrak{C}$  by comparing the rhythms that accompany the two textual modules that they share in common. Table 3 lists the rhythmic motives employed in the settings of *quinari* and *settenari* that Lippmann has cited as examples.<sup>29</sup> Taken together, tables 2 and 3 substantiate Lippmann's underlying premise—that melodic rhythm is closely related to the poetic meter of the text being set—by demonstrating that from a large collection of possibilities *ottocento* composers actually chose only a very small number of rhythmic patterns for individual textual modules. Seen in this light, the range of rhythmic types for these two poetic meters is even more limited than Lippmann has recognized.

At the same time, the evidence presented in these tables contradicts Lippmann's assumption that such connections between poetry and music occur at the level of the musical phrase and the entire poetic line. Instead, they appear most clearly at the level of the motive and the textual module. Table 3 also shows that wherever *quinari* and *settenari* share equivalent textual modules, composers made no distinction between these two meters, drawing on the same rhythmic motives in both cases.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, poetic meter *per se* had little bearing on whether particular motives were combined in larger phrases. In both *quinario* and *settenario*, all combinations of the four opening and closing modules occur together with some frequency.








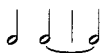




In short, composers tended to write similar rhythms for similar textual modules and made little effort to characterize individual poetic meters with musical rhythm when those meters allowed equivalent treatment. Instead, correspondences between musical motives and modular patterns

**Table 2a**  
Possible Three-note Rhythmic Patterns.























Syllable Accented	Counter-cumulative					No Counter-cumulative Rhythm			
	Syllable 2		Syllable 3		Syllables 2 & 3	Cumulative Syllable 2	Cumulative Syllable 3	Cumulative Syllables 2 and 3	No Cumulative Rhythm
	Cumulative Syllable 3	No Cumulative Rhythm	Cumulative Syllable 2	No Cumulative Rhythm	No Cumulative Rhythm				
1									
2									
1 and 2				—			—		—
1 and 3									
2 and 3				—			—		—
1 and 2				—			—		—
1 and 3									

Note: Rhythmic patterns are given in common time.

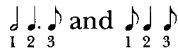
**Table 2b**  
Possible Two-note Rhythmic Patterns  
(Examples given in common time.)

Syllable Accented	Counter-cumulative Syllable 2	Cumulative Syllable 2	No Cumulative or Counter-cumulative Rhythm
1			
2			
1 and 2			
1 and 2			

**Table 3**  
Distribution of Shared Rhythmic Modules in Examples of  
*Quinario* (5°) and *Settenario* (7°) as cited by Lippmann

Opening Module, 3 Syllables	Closing Module, 3 Syllables		Closing Module, 2 Syllables					
	5°	7°	5°	7°				
a. 	9	40	j. 	15	44	q. 	30	48
b. 	13	39	k. 	4	7	r. 	25	23
c. 	14	32	l. 	5	3	s. 	6	7
d. 	17	16	m. 	0	6	t. 	5	4
e. 	1	9	n. 	0	2	u. 	0	2
f. 	0	3	o. 	0	1	v. 	1	0
g. 	0	2	p. 	1	0			
h. 	0	2						
i. 	0	1						

of poetic accent most likely resulted from the application of rules for text setting outlined earlier. A comparison of tables 2 and 3 shows, for example, that unlike the rhythms that composers rejected, the ones that they favored either reinforce musical meter with corresponding musical rhythmic closure and non-closure (as in ♩ ♩ ♩, table 3, motive *a*) or at least avoid syncopated patterns in which rhythmic closure occurs on unaccented beats (for example, ♩ ♩ ♩, motive *h*, occurs only twice among the melodies examined). These preferred rhythms also tend to avoid excessive rhythmic and metric emphasis of a single syllable. For example, the rhythm ♩ ♩ ♩, motive *o*, appears only three times (twice for opening modules in *settenario*, once for a closing module in *quinario*). And only one of the rhythms chosen for opening modules produces the metric ambiguity that can result from beginning on a secondary accent (♩| ♩ ♩, motive *d*). Moreover, in two of the three cases where these opening rhythms begin with downbeats, they give a subordinate metric or rhythmic accent to syllable two, compensating to an extent for the shifting textual accent found in most *quinari* and *settenari*:



In contrast, many of the rhythms that appear infrequently or not at all place a subordinate accent on the third syllable, which consistently lacks accentuation in the poetry as does, for example:



The same factors that led to rhythmic correspondences whenever meters shared equivalent textual modules also resulted in contrasting settings for dissimilar meters, to the extent that they contain non-equivalent modules. For example, the opening three-syllable module in *senario* differs from those of *quinario* and *settenario* both because it includes a necessary *accento obbligato* on the second syllable instead of variable *accenti casuali* on syllables 1 or 2 and because the following module begins with a non-accent instead of the *accento obbligato* on syllable 4 found in the other two meters (see figure 2). Consequently, rhythmic patterns chosen for the opening module in this meter begin almost exclusively with upbeats.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the two motives that appear most frequently in Lippmann's examples of melodies in common time provide secondary stress for syllable 3 involving either metric or rhythmic accent:



The closing module in *senario* is more similar to those of *quinario* and *settenario*, since it includes the necessary *accento comune* on the penultimate



Example 3. Verdi, *Macbeth*, act II.

Adagio

Co - me dal ciel pre - ci - pi - ta

l'om - bra più sem - pre o - scu - ra! In notte u - gal tra -

fis - se - ro Dun - ca - no, il mio si - gnor.

Mil - le af - fan - no se im - ma - gi - ni m'an - nun - cia - no sven - tu - ra,

e il mio pen - sie - ro in - gom - bra - no di

lar - ve e di ter - ror, di ter - ror, e il mio pen - sie - ro in -

gom - bra - no di lar - ve, di lar - ve e di ter - ror

beats. Although Verdi stressed somewhat the weakly accented fourth syllables in lines 4, 6, and 8 by aligning them with secondary musical accents—and even gave one of them rhythmic stress in line 6—he defined them less decisively in lines 4 and 8 by setting them to additive rhythms.

c

(-)  
Co - me dal ciel pre - ci - pi - ta

2

(-)  
L'om - bra più sem - pre o - scu - ra!

4

(-)  
Dun - ca - no il mio si - gnor.

6

(-)  
M'an - nun - cia - no sven - tu - ra,

8

(-)  
Di larve e di ter - ror.

> = *accento comune*  
- = *other accenti obbligati*  
(-) = *accento casuale*

Figure 3. Textual Declamation in "Come dal ciel precipita."



In "Come dal ciel" the rhythms to which the text is declaimed almost always fall into categories that we have found to be standard in the *primo Ottocento*. For example, the principal opening motive (♩ ♪ ♪) is a diminution of the most common rhythm used in settings of *settenari* (♩ ♩ ♩). In one case—the medial motive ♩ ♩ seen in lines 1, 2, 3, and 6—Verdi wrote a variant of a more basic rhythm, ♩ ♩ (line 5), preserving its metric alignment but exaggerating its lack of closure to reinforce the agitated quality of the melody. The only type of motive in this melody that cannot be found in Lippmann's examples for *settenari* is the opening motive ♩ ♩ ♩ in line 4, which nonetheless comes close to the more typical motive ♩ ♩ ♩ in its treatment of rhythmic closure, although its last note does not fall on a secondary metric accent.

Like his contemporaries—and in accordance with theoretical guidelines—Verdi sometimes undercut *accenti casuali* to maintain uniform rhythms either from line to line (when poetic accents shift) or from an initial presentation of a melody to later ones with different texts. Yet he rarely ignored them entirely. Like Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, he normally gave those accents musical emphasis whenever they fall consistently on the same syllable in consecutive lines, as they do in most examples of even-numbered meters and in some examples of odd-numbered ones.<sup>32</sup> Even in setting texts with shifting accents, Verdi took the *accenti casuali* into account either by giving the more frequent textual accent musical emphasis or by varying the prevailing motivic rhythm slightly to make it conform.<sup>33</sup> In "Come dal ciel," for example, the initial downbeat opening of the melody corresponds to accents on the first syllables of lines 1, 2, and 5. Verdi adjusted the rhythm in lines 4, 6, and 8 to accommodate their accented second syllables. Since the beginning of line 7 lacks a clear accent, only in line 3 does a musical accent (on the downbeat) fail to correspond to an *accento casuale*.

Like his contemporaries, Verdi also acknowledged the importance of the *accenti casuali* by avoiding settings in which an accented initial syllable of a line would fall on an upbeat, an arrangement that would juxtapose a subordinate textual accent on the weakest beat of the measure with a non-accent on the strongest one.<sup>34</sup> Verdi and other composers did allow accented syllables to fall on the second beat of the measure, immediately after the downbeat.<sup>35</sup> However, just as they chose rhythmic motives that underscore the accentuation already provided by musical meter, they also tended to reject rhythms that reinforce this metric counter-accentuation of the *accenti casuali*, as in the following hypothetical example:



Instead, they preferred additive or weakly counter-cumulative constructions in which the textual accent has its proper rhythmic relationship to the following textual non-accent, as in line 3 of "Come dal ciel":



In fact, decisive "counter-accentual" rhythms seldom occur unless an *accento casuale* is considerably weaker than the *obbligato* accents.<sup>36</sup>

As I noted earlier, musically unstressed *accenti casuali* occur occasionally in Verdi's early operas, but seem not to represent a conscious manipulation of the text-music relationship. However, in several of Verdi's middle-period operas, such conflicts appear much more frequently in individual melodies and across entire operas. Among those works, this tendency may be observed most clearly in *Il trovatore*, where counter-accentuation contributes to the nervous quality of numerous melodies and underscores dramatic tension in the opera as a whole. Although in this opera Verdi sometimes fell back on a conventional treatment of textual declamation that conforms to his earlier practice,<sup>37</sup> such traditional settings serve in part to highlight other, less regular ones in which he contradicted principles that had guided accentuation in his earlier works. In some instances he rejected his prior approach of accenting the majority of *accenti casuali*.<sup>38</sup> He also wrote several melodies in which *accenti casuali* are mis-aligned until the final lines, where a renewed congruence of text and music releases the tension created in the earlier part of the melody.<sup>39</sup> In others, *accenti casuali* on the first syllables of lines occasionally fall on upbeats, creating a type of counter-accentuation that he had tended to avoid earlier in his career.<sup>40</sup> The most striking cases leave *accenti obbligati* unaccented, while stressing the *accenti casuali* correctly. For example, in the opening stanza of Azucena's "Condotta ell'era in ceppi" (act 2, in *settenari doppi*) Verdi repeatedly set the *obbligato* accent on the fourth syllable of each half line in a metrically weak position, but consistently observed the *accenti casuali*, even adjusting the rhythm in the second half of line 2 and the first half of line 5 to accommodate the shift of textual accent from the second syllable to the first. These examples indicate that among the techniques for enhancing the flexibility and expressiveness of his dramas that Verdi explored during his middle period were new ways of generating aesthetic tension by manipulating the norms of textual declamation.

\* \* \*

Despite their inconsistencies, the three contemporary theoretical discussions of textual declamation examined in this study serve as an indis-

pensable tool for understanding *ottocento* attitudes toward this crucial aspect of compositional technique. They indicate that Verdi and his predecessors were probably more aware of relationships between poetic meter and musical accentuation—the viewpoint presented by Moreen—than of those involving conventionalized patterns of rhythmic durations—the one proposed by Lippmann. In fact, contemporary rules for organizing poetic lines and for observing different types of textual accents in musical settings explain, to a great extent, the existence of the families of rhythmic motives that Lippmann has cataloged. Although such taxonomic relationships between poetic meters and rhythmic types probably did not play a significant role in the compositional process, empirical re-examination of *ottocento* practice has shown that a different aspect of rhythm—the organization of local rhythmic closure and non-closure—did fulfill a crucial function, often serving to reinforce the accentuation provided by musical meter. Furthermore, by revealing the extent to which composers and librettists diverged from textbook rules both in everyday usage and when seeking unusual expressive effects, our comparison of theoretical axioms and *ottocento* practice confirms the assumption that those artists relied more on their own intuitions than on academic standards. Perhaps most importantly, these conclusions show that the act of setting text was less a selective process—in which compositional solutions were chosen from families of conventionalized possibilities—than a more freely generative one, in which compositional decisions were informed by basic principles of musico-poetic accentuation.

## NOTES

The author is grateful to Gary Tomlinson for his help in preparing this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Jacopo Peri, "Forward" to *Euridice*, translated in *Source Readings in Music History*, vol. 3, *The Baroque Era*, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Giuseppe Baini, *Saggio sopra l'identità de'ritmi musicale e poetico* (Firenze: Piatti, 1820); Bonifazio Asioli, *Il maestro di composizione*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Milano: Ricordi, [1836], pl. nos. 5947–49); and Carlo Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti alla composizione d'ogni poema e d'ogni opera appartenente alla musica* (Milano: Pirola, 1841), an edition of which is being prepared by Professor Alessandro Roccatagliati. Although numerous treatises from this period contain discussions of rhythm, these three are, to my knowledge, the only ones which deal substantively with the rhythmic relationship between poetry and music.

<sup>3</sup> "Si rassomigliano nel numero, nella proporzione, nella simmetria, nella continuazione indefinita de ritorni eguali degli accenti musicali e poetici, nella ripetizione uniforme dei piedi somiglievoli porporzionati alla ripetizione uniforme delle musicali battute." Baini, *Saggio*, 5.

Baini (1775–1844) was a musicologist, composer, and teacher, who based his activities in Rome. He held the position of general administrator of the college of papal singers from 1819 until his death, wrote a famous biography of Palestrina, and edited an early collection of the composer's works. See Sergio Lattes, "Baini, Giuseppe (Giacobbe Baldassarre)," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 2:40.

<sup>4</sup> "Si può dire che le Frasi musicali sono Decasillabe, Novenarie, Ottonarie, Settenarie, ec." Asioli, *Maestro di composizione*, 3:38. Page numbers in subsequent references refer to this volume.

Asioli (1769–1832) was a composer of theatrical and instrumental works, writer of numerous treatises, keyboard player, and teacher. He held positions in Correggio, Turin, Venice, Paris, and, most importantly, Milan. In Milan he taught composition, directed the chapel of the Viceroy of Italy, and headed the newly founded Conservatory. See Andrea Sommariva, "Asioli," in *Dizionario enciclopedico universale della musica e dei musicisti* (Torino: UTET, 1985), 1: 157–58.

<sup>5</sup> "They claim that in the Greek association of music and poetry the result for both was perfect—thanks to the shorts and longs common [to both]—rather than [requiring that] the poetry serve . . . melody and harmony. Among us it is certainly not so, because the greater number of short notes compared to long ones cannot provide the poetry with a frequent, fixed return of the accent, either alternately or [after] every two short notes." ("Si pretende che nella greca soziazione de quella musica e poesia perfetto fosse il risultamento d'entrambe, mercè le comuni brevi e lunghe; che anzi le poetiche servisser . . . alla melodia, all'armonie. Fra noi certamente non è così, anco perchè il maggior numero delle brevi sulle lunghe non può fornir alla poesia il frequente, ordinato ritorno del battere, or alternativamente, or ogni due brevi.") Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti*, 103–4. See also pp. 105–11.

Count Carlo Ritorni (1786–1860) lived most of his life in Reggio nell'Emilia. A lover of music, architecture, and poetry, he held several political and administrative offices in Reggio and became one of its most illustrious citizens. He wrote extensive chronicles and memoirs of theatrical life in that city, as well as two important treatises, the *Ammaestramenti* and the earlier *Consigli sull'arte di dirigere gli spettacoli* (Bologna: Nobili, 1825). On Ritorni's life and writings see Magda Prati, *Carlo Ritorni: I suoi scritti e le sue idee sul melodramma*, *Bollettino storico reggiano*, vol. 5 (1972).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Anthony Moreen, "Integration of Text Forms and Musical Forms in Verdi's Early Operas" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1975), 9–26; and Friedrich Lippmann, "Der italienische Vers und der musikalische Rhythmus. Zum Verhältnis von Vers und Musik in der italienischen Oper des 19. Jahrhunderts, mit einem Rückblick auf die 2. Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Analecta musicologica* 12 (1973): 253–369; 14 (1974): 324–410; and 15 (1975): 298–333.

<sup>7</sup> This table includes information adapted from Moreen, *Text Forms and Musical Forms*, 13–19; Bains, *Saggio*, 5–6; Asioli, *Maestro di composizione*, 38–41; and Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti*, 106–109. Moreen drew his data from two recent textbooks on Italian poetry: Bruno Migliorini and Fredi Chiappelli, *Elementi di stilistica e di versificazione italiana* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1960) and Alberto del Monte, *Retorica, Stilistica, Versificazione* (Torino: Loescher, 1968).

In table 1, numerals designate syllables on which accents are said to occur. Numerals in parentheses indicate accents which, according to these writers, are less common than those given without parentheses. Semicolons separate different possible patterns of accentuation for a given meter. For example, according to Asioli, in *settenario*, accents may fall on syllables 4 and 6, or on 2, 4, and 6, or less frequently on 2 and 6.

<sup>8</sup> In traditional Italian versification, *piano* lines have the number of syllables stipulated by the name of the meter. For example, *quinari piani* have five syllables. *Tronco* and *sdruciolio* lines actually have one syllable less or more, respectively, than their names suggest. Thus, *quinari tronchi* have four syllables; *quinari sdruciolii*, six syllables.

<sup>9</sup> Asioli related musical tempo—by which he refers to the "meter" of modern usage—to poetic declamation ("al numero delle sillabe") and to poetic accentuation ("agli accenti o sillabe lunghe," *Maestro di composizione*, 37). Bains employed the "ritmo" of his title to mean our "meter": "Here it pleases me to point out such a similarity, which relates musical rhythm

and the rhythm of measured verses in the progression of the accents and the beats three by three, four by four, and five by five." ("Piacemi qui di additare una cotal somiglianza, che passa fra il ritmo musicale, ed il ritmo delle versificazioni armoniche nella progression degli accenti e delle battute di terza in terza, o di quarta in quarta, o di quinta in quinta." Bainsi, *Saggio*, 5. See also pp. 1–2 and 6.) Each of Bainsi's groupings includes the downbeats of two successive measures, so that, for example, in his terms a progression "three by three" ("di terza in terza") refers to duple meter.

<sup>10</sup> For example, for *settenario*, none of these theorists mentioned possible accents on syllables 1 and 3.

<sup>11</sup> "Non può esser dunque melodioso in musica ciocchè prima in poesia non è" (*Ammaestramenti*, 108).

<sup>12</sup> "Formiamo il verso stesso tutto d'un pezzo, quasi grande piedi, colle lunghe disposte a certe sedi fisse." Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti*, 104. Bainsi's and Asioli's formulations indicate that they too recognized this principle. See Bainsi, *Saggio*, 5–6, and Asioli, *Maestro di composizione*, 38–41.

<sup>13</sup> "Nelle canzoni propriamente a cantarsi rifiutalo il poeta, perchè non sostiene, e disperde la melodia, e lo potrebbe rigettar il filarmonico, perchè gli farebbe mescolar il tempo dispari al pari" (*Ammaestramenti*, 109). Ritorni and other theorists equated *tempo dispari* with triple meter, *tempo pari* with duple meter.

<sup>14</sup> Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti*, p. 109; Asioli, *Maestro di composizione*, 40. *Accenti obbligati* were also termed *accenti caratteristici* by Ritorni and *accenti necessari* by Asioli.

<sup>15</sup> In his discussion of *quinario*, Asioli implied that accents are best separated by fewer than three non-accents: "*Quinario* has no other obligatory accent than [that] on the fourth [syllable]; but if it should also have one on the first or second, it would become much more harmonious, since instead of beginning with three short unaccented syllables, it would begin [with an accent] on the first or second [syllable] over a weak beat, to have it end strongly on the *accento comune*." ("Il *Quinario* non ha altr'obbligo di accento che sulla 4.<sup>a</sup>: ma se l'avrà ancor sulla 1.<sup>a</sup>, o sulla 2.<sup>a</sup>, diverrà molto più armonioso, giacchè la frase, invece di cominciare con tre sillabe brevi in levare, comincerà sulla 1.<sup>a</sup>, o sulla 2.<sup>a</sup> sopra il movimento debole, per avere la sua desinenza sull'accento comune nel forte" [*Maestro di composizione*, 40].)

<sup>16</sup> "L'accento caratteristico risponde ad una nota tempo in battere" (*Ammaestramenti*, 106).

<sup>17</sup> "I musici . . . qualora in questo verso, e in altri richieggano accenti oltre gli obbligati e tengano conto di accenti casuali, van più oltre de'limiti dell'arte poetica, e fan vedere che non bene s'accordano le origini delle due arti" (*Ammaestramenti*, 109).

<sup>18</sup> "L'ordine delle battute non suole cominciar col verso, ma solamente allorchè può accordarsi una nota in battere col primo accento obbligato" (*Ammaestramenti*, 106). Asioli expressed a similar concern in his discussion of *ottonario*: "The necessary accents of *ottonario* fall on the third and seventh [syllables]. [Consequently] the composer must begin the [musical] phrase two notes before the [first] downbeat, so that the first accent is situated on a strong beat. The three following short syllables occur in the remainder of the measure, in order for the accent on the seventh syllable to fall on the first beat of the next measure." ("Gli accenti necessari dell'*Ottinario* cadono sulla 3.<sup>a</sup> e 7.<sup>a</sup>, per cui il Compositore deve cominciare la frase due note prima del battere, affinchè il primo accento si trovi sul tempo forte, e le tre brevi seguenti abbiano luogo nel rimanente della misura per cadere coll'accento della 7.<sup>a</sup> sul primo movimento dell'altra misura" [*Maestro di composizione*, 40].)

<sup>19</sup> This and a number of similar melodies have been cited by Lippmann ("Vers und Rhythmus" [1975]: 313) to illustrate the "gross violations of the rhythm of the individual poetic line" ("große Verstöße gegen den Rhythmus des einzelnen Verses") by Verdi and others.

<sup>20</sup> Moreen, "Text Forms and Musical Forms," 25.

<sup>21</sup> "La Sillaba lunga, seguendo le leggi della prosodia, è considerata del doppio valore della breve. Ma nella Frase musicale non è valutata a rigore, poichè questa, avendo sempre di mira la varietà di concerto, le accresce, o le diminuisce la durata, coll'unica avvertenza di collocarla impretebilmente sul tempo ritmico. La sillaba breve, che invariabilmente trovasi sui tempi deboli della misura, è talvolta del valore della lunga ne' tempi veloci e pari, conserva il proprio valore, ossia la sua metà, nelle Triple, Sestuple e Dodecuple, e cade spessissimo nelle frazioni più minute dei tempi deboli, le quali, precipitandosi, quasi direi, sulla sillaba lunga, e sul tempo ritmico, ne rendono l'accento assai più vivo e più rimarcato" (*Maestro di composizione*, 38). As Renato Di Benedetto has observed, Asioli did recognize a relationship between harmonic rhythm and poetic accent and non-accent. See "Lineamenti di una teoria della melodia nella trattatistica italiana fra il 1790 e il 1830," in *Colloquium: Die stilistische Entwicklung der italienischen Musik zwischen 1770 und 1830 und ihre Beziehungen zum Norden (Rom 1978)*, *Analecta musicologica* 21 (1982): 431.

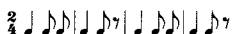
<sup>22</sup> "Qui il compositore acquista un'illimitata facoltà di variare, accrescere e diminuire le note, e la durata delle sillabe; come pure d'immaginare sullo stesso metro e parole, tante e diverse frasi quante ne possono scaturire dalla sua fervida fantasia, ciò che produrrà sempre nuovo e crescente allettamento nell'uditore" (*Maestro di composizione*, 39).

<sup>23</sup> "Vers und Rhythmus" (1973): 258-60.

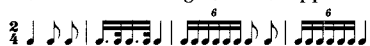
<sup>24</sup> For example, his first subgroup of *quinario* is described as "melodies in all meters that begin with the succession long-short-short" ("Melodien aller Taktarten mit Beginn in der Relation lang-kurz-kurz") in the following form:



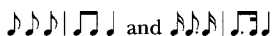
This category includes examples as different in their note-to-note rhythms as:



(Isabella's "Per lui ch'adoro," *L'Italiana in Algeri*, act 2, Lippmann's ex. 27d) and:



(Tancredi's "Di tanti palpiti," *Tancredi*, act 1, Lippmann's ex. 27c). (See "Vers und Rhythmus," [1973]: 279). Only rarely does Lippmann differentiate rhythmic sub-groups by their note-to-note melodic rhythms. See, for example, pp. 289-90, where he distinguishes two types characterized by the rhythms:



More often, however, he incorporates rhythms with similar distinctions between steady note values and dotted patterns into single subgroups, as in his following examples (p. 280):



and



<sup>25</sup> "Vers und Rhythmus" (1973): 289-90, examples 45b and 46a.

<sup>26</sup> In addition to these opening and closing modules, *settenari* also incorporate a medial module (accented syllable 4 and non-accented syllable 5; see figure 1) which are not found in *quinari* and which, therefore, would not enter into this comparison.

<sup>27</sup> Narmour has explained rhythmic closure and non-closure in *Beyond Schenkerism: The Need for Alternatives in Music Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 148-52. I have drawn on his terms to facilitate my own discussion of this issue.

Primary accents may coincide with syllables 1 or 2 of the opening textual module in *quinario* and *settenario*, but not with syllable 3, because syllable 4 in these meters is an *obbligato* accent which, according to contemporary rules, must be preceded by a non-accent or weaker accent; secondary accents may occur on any one of the three syllables. Cumulative or counter-cumulative rhythms may be completed by syllable 2, syllable 3, both, or neither. Naturally, a single syllable cannot complete cumulative and counter-cumulative rhythms simultaneously.

<sup>28</sup> In tables 2a and 2b, in the column "Accent," an italicized numeral indicates that the syllable in question falls on a downbeat; a non-italicized numeral indicates that the syllable falls on a secondary accent (the third beat in common time). Across table 2a, headings in the top line indicate whether or not a counter-cumulative rhythm occurs and which syllable (if any) carries the note that completes that rhythm (for example, "Counter-cumulative Syllable 2" means that a counter-cumulative rhythm ends on the second syllable of the module). Headings in the second line indicate whether or not cumulative rhythms occur and which syllable (if any) carries the note that completes that rhythm (for example, "Cumulative Syllable 3" means that a cumulative rhythm ends on the third syllable of the module). Column headings in table 2b are similar to those in table 2a. Bar lines are indicated by vertical strokes whenever they fall within the rhythmic patterns. Otherwise, the first note of a rhythmic pattern falls on the downbeat of the measure.

Augmentations or diminutions of the rhythms represented by the categories presented in these tables are considered to be variations of simpler forms, as are patterns which intensify points of closure or non-closure by exaggerating rhythmic motion. As one illustration, in the poetic-rhythmic module:

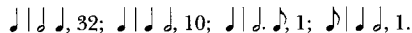


the primary accent falls on syllable 2, a secondary accent on syllable 3. Syllable 2 completes a cumulative rhythm, syllable 3 a counter-cumulative rhythm. Consequently, in table 2a this rhythm falls in column 3, line 5. The rhythm ♪|♪♪, which intensifies the same points of rhythmic closure and non-closure, belongs to the same category as my first example. However, the rhythm ♪|♪♪ represents a different type, because its third note completes an additive rhythm instead of a counter-cumulative one. It constitutes a variant of the rhythm ♪|♪♪, which appears in column 6, line 5. This system of categorization obviously ignores some rhythmic distinctions that influence melodic affect in order to distinguish and correlate rhythms according to the function that most concerns us, that is, their accentuation of the text.

<sup>29</sup> In table 3, numerals indicate the number of occurrences of each type for each meter. The collection of several hundred examples quoted in Lippmann's article provides a convenient and, I believe, reliable data-base for this type of investigation.

<sup>30</sup> The same closing motives also dominate the remaining poetic meters (*senario*, *ottonario*, *novenario*, and *decasillabo*). However, because these meters have non-equivalent opening modules, they necessarily elicit different sets of opening rhythmic patterns.

<sup>31</sup> Lippmann's examples show the following distribution of rhythms:



<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Lady Macbeth's "Or tutti sorgete" in *senari doppi* (act 1) and Luisa's "Lo vidi, e'l primo palpito" in *settenari* (*Luisa Miller*, act 1).

<sup>33</sup> It is not at all clear that the trend toward "misplaced" accents intensified when motivically uniform melodies became more commonplace, as Lippmann has suggested ("Vers und Rhythmus" [1975]: 313). In fact, Rossini often wrote more obvious counter-accentual rhythms than later composers would have done in similar contexts. As they more consistently unified

their melodies through motivic repetition, Rossini's followers demonstrated increasing care in balancing the needs of rhythmic symmetry with those of proper textual accentuation.

<sup>34</sup> For example, in "Pietà, rispetto, amore" (*Macbeth*, act 4), he varied the prevailing opening rhythm in lines 5 and 7 (from  $\text{♪} | \text{♪} \text{♪} \text{♪}$  to  $\text{♪} \text{♪} \text{♪}$ ) to place their accented first syllables on downbeats.

<sup>35</sup> The following pattern appears frequently in Verdi's melodies:



as in "Deserto sulla terra."

<sup>36</sup> For example, in line 6 ("Le profetesse il trono") of Lady Macbeth's "Vieni! t'affretta! accendere" (act 1), Verdi could put considerable stress on the opening article *Le* because neither of the two ensuing syllables provides a strong accent.

<sup>37</sup> For example, he still devised rhythms that conform to the *accenti casuali* whenever they remain consistent from line to line or, occasionally, adjusted his rhythms to compensate for shifting *accenti casuali*. See Leonora's cabaletta in act 1 ("Di tale amor che dirsi"), in which the *accenti casuali* fall on the second syllable except in line 7, and her "D'amor sull'ali rosee" (act 4), where beginning in line 4 Verdi wrote new rhythms to accommodate the now prevalent stress on the second syllable.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Ferrando's "Abbieta zingara" (act 1), in which the predominant accent on syllable 2 is repeatedly set as the second beat of the measure.

<sup>39</sup> See Manrico's stanza "Nè m'ebbe il ciel, nè l'orrido" from the finale of act 2, in which the *accenti casuali* are mostly non-congruent with the musical accents until the final two lines.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, lines 3 and 4 of Azucena's "Deh, rallentate, o barbari" (act 3, trio).