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Verdi Forum

Number 39 Article 5

1-1-2012

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Davis, John A. (2012) "Verdi, the Theater, and Risorgimento Nationalism," *Verdi Forum*: No. 39, Article 5.
Available at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf/vol1/iss39/5

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Keywords
Giuseppe Verdi

This article is available in Verdi Forum: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf/vol1/iss39/5

Verdi, the Theater, and Risorgimento Nationalism

John A. Davis

Can there be any doubt about Verdi's role in the Risorgimento? On the eve of Italy's Second War of Independence against Austria in 1859, it was claimed that the composer's name was an acrostic for Vittorio Emanuele, King of Italy (V.E.R.D.I =Vittorio Emanuele, Re d'Italia).[1] Scholars still debate whether the story originated before or after Unification, by which time Verdi, like Alessandro Manzoni, had become a senator of the new kingdom and taken his place in the pantheon of Italy's founding fathers. Thereafter, Verdi's fame as a key protagonist of Italian unification only grew. The unofficial national poet of the Risorgimento, Giosuè Carducci, later claimed, for example, that Verdi's music and songs were "unforgettable and sacred to anyone born before the '48 [the 1848 risings]."[2] Since then, Verdi's place in the historical memory of Italian nationalism has remained firm. Following his death in 1901, the huge crowds that gathered to pay tribute sang the chorus of Hebrew slaves, "Va, pensiero," from *Nabucco* (1842). A century later, on the anniversary of Verdi's death in 2001, then-President of the Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, claimed that Italy had become a single nation in part as a consequence of the inspirational force of Verdi's music.[3]

Prominent historians of Italian opera subscribe to that view. Philip Gossett has vigorously argued that before and during the revolutions of 1848, Verdi's choruses played an important role in transmitting enthusiasm for the nationalist cause.[4] David Kimbell went much further when he claimed that Carducci's tribute to Verdi should be extended to "a whole repertory of Italian opera from Rossini to Verdi. From the theatre which was its proper home this music overflowed into the streets (ground out on barrel-organs), into divine services (as organ voluntaries), into soirées, receptions and social gatherings, grand or modest. It became a kind of folk music."[5] Kimbell has elsewhere remarked that in the Risorgimento the impact of theater was such that it functioned as "a kind of spiritual Trojan Horse."[6]

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[1] See, for instance, Michael Sawall, "'Viva V.E.R.D. I.': Origine e ricezione di un simbolo nazionale nell'anno 1859," in *Verdi 2001: Proceedings of the International Conference*, ed. Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Montemorra Marvin, and Marco Marica, 123–31 (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2003).

[2] Cited in David Kimbell, "Italian Opera since 1800," in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, ed. Peter Brand and Lino Pertile, 1st ed., 450–56 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), at 450.

[3] See http://www.carloazeglιociampi.it/71?resource_1681=319, Intervento del Presidente della Repubblica Carlo Azeglio Ciampi in occasione dell'incontro con le Autorità e i cittadini della città di Parma, presented 27 January 2001 in Parma; accessed 8 December 2014.

[4] Philip Gossett, "Becoming a Citizen: The Chorus in Risorgimento Opera,' *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2 (1990): 41–61; see also idem, "*Edizioni distrutte* and the Significance of Operatic Choruses during the Risorgimento," in *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*, ed. Victoria Johnson, Jane Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman, 181–242 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[5] Kimbell, "Italian Opera since 1800," 450.

[6] David Kimbell, *Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 394.

Others have been more skeptical. Luchino Visconti's deeply cynical Risorgimento epic, *Senso* (1954), famously opens with a production of Verdi's *Il trovatore* at Venice's Teatro La Fenice on the eve of Italy's Third War of Independence in 1866. In the movie, the opera's performance gives rise to a patriotic anti-Austrian demonstration, but Visconti used the protest to ridicule the stagey and rhetorical character of Risorgimento nationalism. In this there are echoes of the Italian Marxist writer and former political leader Antonio Gramsci, for whom the failure of Italy's Risorgimento to take the form of a modern bourgeois revolution reflected the absence of a nationalist project capable of reaching out to the masses. Gramsci's reservations were anticipated by Giuseppe Mazzini, who in a now famous but at the time almost completely unknown essay, *Filosofia della musica* published in Paris in 1836, lamented the lack of a national consciousness in the work of Italy's great operatic composers, in particular Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and Mercadante. A decade earlier, the poet Giacomo Leopardi had been even harsher in his insistence that even in music, the field in which Italy's cultural pre-eminence was internationally recognized, there was no sign of a genuinely Italian musical culture.[7] No one spent more time promoting a national culture in Italy in those years than Mazzini, and his criticism of the leading Italian composers of the first two decades after the Restoration is not easy to ignore. But when Mazzini's essay was written in 1836, Verdi's career had not yet begun, and it was at Mazzini's suggestion that Verdi wrote a patriotic hymn in 1848, the *Inno popolare*, which sets the text "Suona la tromba" by the young patriot Goffredo Mameli, poetry that Mazzini acquired specifically for this purpose.

That in terms of both music and political culture Verdi was part of a new generation can hardly be doubted. After his early successes he was lionized by the progressive liberal Milanese aristocracy, became a regular frequenter of their salons, and was a close friend of Clara Maffei. Did that make Verdi a committed nationalist whose music contributed to the growing movement in support of Italian independence and unity before 1848? Or was Verdi's nationalism a retrospective reconstruction? Since his later place in the pantheon of Risorgimento heroes is not in question, the present debates over Verdi's politics and the ways in which they were, or were not, expressed in his music are focused primarily on the period from *Nabucco* (1842) and *I Lombardi alla Prima crociata* (1843) to the revolutions of 1848–49.

The broader questions that are involved in these debates have recently been the subject of some excellent critical reviews, which underline, among many issues, how the renewed interest in the politics of Verdi's music reflects the convergence of two separate developments. On one hand, historians have been busy reassessing nationalism and its role in the Risorgimento, while, on the other, musicologists and historians of music and theater have been taking a closer interest in the material, political, and social contexts in

[7] On the absence of an Italian musical culture, see, for instance, Mary Ann Smart, "Verdi, Italian Romanticism and the Risorgimento," in *Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, ed. Scott L. Balthazar, , 29–48 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); idem, "How Political Were Verdi's Operas?" Metaphors of Progress in the Reception of *I Lombardi alla Prima crociata*," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18 (2013): 190–204, reprinted with permission in the present issue of *Verdi Forum*, 40–52; and Roger Parker, "Verdi Politico: A Wounded Cliché Responds," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17 (2012): 427–36.

which opera was created, performed, and received.[8] The two sets of debates have converged in often stimulating and constructive ways. Much of the retrospective, anecdotal, and post-Unification speculation that has cluttered Verdi's image has been cleared away, and musicologists in particular have refocused the debates on the issues of author intent and audience reception. Far from resolving disagreements, however, the leading protagonists of the newest research remain deeply, and its seems irreconcilably, divided. As Mary Ann Smart has argued, this reflects the technical complexity of the questions that are being asked and also the frustrating lack of conclusive evidence.[9]

The inconclusiveness of these debates is in itself important, however, and raises serious questions about the assumptions that underlie both recent reassessments of the role of nationalism in bringing about Italian Unification and the claim that Risorgimento nationalism was a precocious phenomenon of mass culture. Scholarly interest in Risorgimento nationalism is quite recent in origin. In the nineteenth century, it was taken pretty much for granted that Italy's political unification was the consequence of a reawakened sense of national identity—a national Risorgimento. But that simple causal nexus fell apart when, after the Second World War, the Risorgimento became the principal suspect in the search for the origins of Fascism. For at least three decades, Gramsci's posthumously published prison writings transformed the Risorgimento into a failed or incomplete bourgeois revolution, or, to use a term that Gramsci borrowed from the nineteenth-century Neapolitan writer Vincenzo Cuoco, merely a "passive revolution."[10] Class took center stage and nationalism moved to the wings, becoming little more than an ideological tool that was deployed with particular skill by the moderate liberal elites to disguise what were, in reality, narrow class interests. By contrast, the radicals' failure to develop a national project capable of reaching out to the masses was for Gramsci another reason for their defeat. Even had they formulated more inclusive programs, the limits of literacy posed insurmountable obstacles to communication, since at the time of Unification it is estimated that less than two per cent of Italians were able to read and most spoke dialect rather than Italian.

Benedetto Croce's celebration of the liberal and progressive force of Risorgimento nationalism was Gramsci's principal target, although Croce too accepted that the national project had been the work of a small, progressive cultural elite.[11] But, by the late 1970s, these debates had pretty much run their course, and the assumptions on which they relied were coming under increasingly critical scrutiny. Interest in the

[8] See, for example, Axel Körner, "Verdi and the Historians: Politics, Passion, and New "mezzi di lavoro," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 20 (2015): 127–37; idem, "Opera and Nation in Nineteenth-Century Italy: Conceptual and Methodological Approaches," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17 (2012): 393–99; Mary Ann Smart "Magical Thinking: Reason and Emotion in Some Recent Literature on Verdi and Politics," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17 (2012): 437–47; idem, "How Political Were Verdi's Operas?"; Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, "Introduction: The Risorgimento in Opera," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18 (2013): 172–75.

[9] Smart, "How Political Were Verdi's Operas?".

[10] The "prison notebooks," dating from 1929 to 1935, have most recently been published as *Antonio Gramsci, Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerretana, 4 vols., Edizione critica dell'Istituto Gramsci (Turin: Einaudi, 2014). On Cuoco's "passive revolution," see Vincenzo Cuoco, *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799*, ed. Bruce Haddock and Filippo Sabetti, trans. David Gibbons, The Lorenzo Da Ponte Italian Library (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

[11] For example, see Benedetto Croce, *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (Bari: Laterza, 1928).

Risorgimento fell away as historians moved on to other things. Then, just as the Risorgimento seemed fated to oblivion, the dramatic changes in Italy's political fortunes following the end of the Cold War gave it an unexpected new lease on life.

In the early 1990s, the political system that had shaped post-World War II Italian politics rapidly collapsed, and new political movements emerged to contest the political spaces formerly occupied by the now crisis-ridden Christian Democrat, Communist, and Socialist Parties. The newcomers ranged from former Neo-Fascists to the separatist Lega Nord, various anti-liberal Catholic groups, and the amorphous forces that were attracted to the populist politics of Silvio Berlusconi. These groups had little, if anything, in common except that none of them could claim any connection with the anti-Fascist alliance on whose values the politics of Italy's post-war Republic had been founded. To establish their legitimacy, the new contenders needed to challenge those values, which meant targeting the Anti-Fascist Resistance and the Risorgimento. Of the two, the Risorgimento was the softer target, not least because historians of all colors seemed to be in agreement that the Italian people had played virtually no part in the national revolution or in the liberal state that it created. An eclectic mix of Croce's focus on the liberal elites, Gramsci's "passive revolution," and the insistence of the Catholic Right that a small, secularist elite had imposed Unification on Italians by force proved to be an ideal base on which to rewrite Italian history in ways that connected very effectively with a deep current of "anti-politics" in Italy at that moment. The new parties promised that they would restore power to the people, and no one understood how to orchestrate the politics of discontent better than Berlusconi. When the elections of 1994 briefly brought his Forza Italia coalition to power, the media was ready to mount a sustained and effective campaign against the so-called "First" Republic and the Risorgimento.

Defenders of the Risorgimento were caught off guard. Gramsci's "passive revolution," from which the great mass of the Italian people had been excluded, now proved to be a damaging legacy, but new directions in the study of modern nationalism pointed to quite different interpretations. Historians had for some time been underlining the cultural and emotional dimensions of the late nineteenth-century nationalization of the masses and the appeal of Fascism. In 2000, Alberto Mario Banti's *La nazione del Risorgimento* brought these new approaches to the study of Risorgimento nationalism. [12] Drawing on a wide-ranging analysis of literature, art, and music of the period—the "Risorgimental canon"—Banti argued that the representations of an imagined Italian national community constituted a coherent cultural discourse of nationalism ("formazione discorsiva").[13] Its core was formed by the reiteration of a set of highly emotive tropes, notably bonds of family and kinship, shared histories, the obligation to defend the integrity and honor of the community, the glorification of sacrifice. Through such images and representations Risorgimento nationalism not only took definition but also acquired

[12] Alberto Mario Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento; Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000).

[13] Banti discussed "Risorgimental canon" in ibid. His discussion of "formazione discorsiva" can be found in Alberto Mario Banti and Roberto Bizzocchi, eds., *Immagini della nazione nell'Italia del Risorgimento* (Rome: Carocci, 2002), 11.

the emotive force that inspired large numbers of Italian men and women to sacrifice themselves for the national cause.[14]

Gramsci's "passive revolution" faded conveniently into oblivion and the Risorgimento re-emerged as a precocious phenomenon of mass culture. This reformulation of Risorgimento nationalism has proved to be extremely constructive and creative, providing the focus for an impressively multidisciplinary project that has brought to light aspects of Italian culture, religion, and society of the age of the Risorgimento that were previously unknown and unstudied.[15] But even though this interpretation has raised important new questions about the relationship between politics and culture, the greater part of Banti's key formulations remain untested. As critics have frequently pointed out, many of the claims about how contemporaries understood nationalist imagery and how those understandings conditioned their actions remain at best conjectural. No less conjectural are the assertions that Risorgimento nationalism was a mass phenomenon and that Italy became united because a national community already existed in the minds of Italians.[16]

Which, not before time, brings us back to Verdi. The theater's role as the principal site of artistic creation, consumption, and collective sociability in Italy in these years makes it a critical testing ground for Banti's claims. The theater's place in the social and cultural lives of Italians, or at least of the wealthier Italians, during this time, has recently been remapped by Carlotta Sorba, who has shown how, after the legitimist Restorations of 1815, all of the Italian states indulged in a real boom in theater-building. Not only the principal cities and capitals but also most provincial towns competed to build new theaters, which were seen as essential marks of progress and civilization. By the time of Unification the ratio of theaters to population was higher in Italy than anywhere else in Europe.[17] Although there were prose theaters as well, opera was the main attraction, and John Rosselli has shown how the repertories of the leading theaters were extraordinary: between 1809 and 1844, for instance, the two leading theaters in Naples (the Teatro San Carlo and the Teatro del Fondo) staged an average of more than 100 productions each year, and in 1824–25 that number rose to 138.[18]

The claim that in the age of the Risorgimento the theater was the cultural hub in the lives of urban and wealthier Italians does not need to be labored. Apart from churches, theaters were the only places where large numbers of Italians could lawfully meet on a regular basis. These were precisely the groups that participated most actively in

[14] Banti and Bizzocchi, ibid., 11; see also Maurizio Isabella, "Rethinking Italy's Nation-Building 150 Years Afterwards: The 'New' Risorgimento Historiography," in *Past and Present* 271 (2012): 247–68.

[15] For a fuller discussion of these developments, see Silvana Patriarca and Lucy Riall, eds., *The Risorgimento Revisited: Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Alberto Mario Banti and Paul Ginsborg, "Per una nuova storia del Risorgimento," in *Storia d'Italia*, ed. Alberto Mario Banti and Paul Ginsborg, Annali 22 "Il Risorgimento," xxiii–xli (Turin: Einaudi, 2007).

[16] Banti and Bizzocchi, *Immagini della nazione*, 11; but see also David Laven, "Why Patriots Wrote and What Reactionaries Read: Reflections on Alberto Banti's *La nazione del Risorgimento*," *Nations and Nationalism* 15 (2009): 419–26; Körner, "Verdi and the Historians"; idem, "Opera and Nation."

[17] Carlotta Sorba, *I teatri: L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001).

[18] John Rosselli, "Censorship," in *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, 2d ed., 4 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1992), IV: 57–67.

the Risorgimento, so if nationalism permeated Italian culture and society before 1848, we might expect to find its imprint, above all, in the theater and in those theatrical works, especially operas (although by no means only those by Italian composers), that enjoyed the greatest success among audiences of the time. Nor should this be difficult since everything that took place in the theaters, both on and off the stage, was closely monitored and recorded by the authorities and in the music press—a rare example of critical, though far from free, public debate in a time of censorship—and in the abundant surviving letters of singers, composers, librettists, and impresarios. This mass of documentation, in other words, stretches far beyond official accounts to more intimate documents where personal feelings may be easier to recover.[19]

The themes identified by Banti as core tropes of the national discourse —kinship, honor, duty, sacrifice, and community—were abundantly present in the operatic works of the whole period, yet evidence that these were associated in any specific ways with nationalism, by either the composers or the audiences, is lacking. Such themes did not alarm the censors, who had quite different preoccupations, and, in any case, they were inseparable from the sensibilities that made Romanticism the artistic expression of the moment. However, although Romanticism deeply influenced Risorgimento nationalism, any attempt to make the two synonymous is unlikely to succeed. Romanticism simply pointed in too many different directions and was open to too many different and often contradictory meanings and interpretations to be reduced to a single "discourse." Since no other artform offered better opportunities for expressing Romantic sensibilities and passions than operatic melodrama, it is hardly surprising that nationalist Romanticism should have been similarly elusive, unfocused, and open to many different interpretations and understandings.[20]

The difficulty of pinning down anything beyond the loosest and most oblique nationalist allusions on Italian stages in these years may indicate, however, that the attempt to reduce Risorgimento nationalism to a single "cultural discourse" before Unification is unduly reductionist. It also suggests a failure to distinguish sufficiently between nationalism before and after the creation of the nation-state. Nationalism before the nation was in many, perhaps most, respects both different and less clearly defined than what came later. As Dominique Reill has recently argued, among Italian nationalist thinkers and writers before 1848 there was very little agreement over what the national community should look like, never mind how to achieve such a community.[21] Niccolò Tommaseo, Vincenzo Gioberti, Giuseppe Mazzini, Carlo Cattaneo, Michele Amari, and Luigi Settembrini all conceived of the national community in ways that were not only difficult but impossible to reduce to a single and focused discursive formulation. And before 1848, Risorgimento liberalism and nationalism were, as Maurizio Isabella has

[19] John A. Davis, "Italy," in *The Frightful Stage: Political Censorship of the Theater in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Robert J Goldstein (Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), 190–227.

[20] See Giovanni Carsaniga, "The Age of Romanticism," in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, ed. Peter Brand and Lino Pertile, 399–449 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); for a different set of conclusions, see Paul Ginsborg, "European Romanticism in the Italian Risorgimento," in Patriarca and Riall, *The Risorgimento Revisited*, 18–36.

[21] Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multinationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

recently argued, deeply "transnational."[22] These are features that are not easy to reconcile with the deeply xenophobic tropes of Banti's discourse, but they do sit well with Gramsci's claim because Italian opera before 1848 was the fullest artistic representation of cosmopolitan Romanticism: its inspiration was cosmopolitan and international rather than nationalist.[23]

Few Italians were better placed to understand the cosmopolitan modernities of their age than the composers, singers, and impresarios whose successes carried them from the Italian capitals to Vienna, Paris, London, and Madrid. That composers were keenly aware of the need to adapt their works to the tastes of different audiences we know from Bellini's often cited letter to his confidant, the composer and scholar Francesco Florimo, in May 1834 while he was working on the version of *I Puritani* that was to have its first Italian performance in Naples, following its resounding success in Paris. After discussing the arrangements for the Teatro San Carlo production, Bellini addressed concerns that his librettist, Count Carlo Pepoli, was inserting openly political references into the work. To prevent this, he had instructed Pepoli that the opening aria of the Paris production, "All'alba sorgerà il sol di libertà," should be removed when the opera was performed in Naples. He explained to Florimo: "This inno was written just for Paris, where everyone loves to think about liberty. You know what I mean? For Italy, Pepoli himself will change the entire *inno* and will not even use the word 'liberty,' and will change any other liberal references in the opera; thus you do not have to do anything, since once the libretto is modified, they will be eager to perform it in Naples."[24]

This text is a good illustration of what Smart referred to as the frustratingly inconclusive nature of what at first sight might seem to be a very explicit set of comments (see p. 32 above). Bellini's comments demonstrate that he knew exactly what Pepoli was up to, but what do they tell us about his own politics? Do they reveal how a nationalist sympathizer had learned to disguise his feelings? We know that Count Pepoli was one of the political exiles who left Italy after the revolutions of 1831 and whose politics were neither consistent nor focused.[25] We know too that in Paris Bellini was a frequent visitor to the salon of the Countess Belgioioso, a semi-voluntary exile who had become principal financier of Mazzini's revolutionary Giovine Italia. That was where the composer met Pepoli. But whether that made Bellini a sympathizer we do not know, and the letter reveals only a clear understanding that different audiences had different tastes and that Italian audiences (not just the censors) were not yet ready for political references that in France or England would attract no attention. But, if Bellini acknowledged that there was

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[22] Maurizio Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile: Italian Emigrés and the Liberal International in Post-Napoleonic Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[23] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith; trans. William Boelhower, 377–80 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

[24] *Vincenzo Bellini: Memorie e lettere*, ed. Francesco Florimo (Florence: G. Barbèra, 1882; reprint, 1976), 413–14, letter of 26 May 1834: "Quest'inno è fatto pel solo Parigi, ove si amano pensieri di libertà. Hai capito? Per l'Italia Pepoli cambierà egli stesso tutto l'inno e non nominerà neanche il solo motto *libertà*, e così cambierà se nell'opera vi saranno frasi liberali; quindi non ti prender cura, chè il libro sarà accomodato, se lo vorranno dare a Napoli."

[25] My thanks to Axel Körner for this information, which can be found in his forthcoming entry on "Carlo Pepoli (1796–1881)," in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome, Treccani, forthcoming).

a cultural gap between Naples and Paris, this was something that he sought to accommodate, not change.[26]

Bellini's 1834 letter reveals how quickly contexts and meanings changed. A decade later, Gioberti's appeal to the Italians to recover their former cultural primacy in Europe made cultural and material modernity a critical ingredient of Risorgimento nationalism, yet the enthusiasm inspired by the election of Pope Pius IX in 1846 indicated that the meaning of this nationalism was still loose and undefined. In the hungry '40s, the relative prosperity of the previous decade had withered away, social and political tensions were growing throughout Europe, and in Italy the rulers were under growing pressure from moderates like Gioberti to introduce reforms that would stave off the threat of revolution. At the same time, Mazzini's efforts to organize insurrections in Italy had increased and resulted in the attempt in 1844 by the Venetian Bandiera brothers to raise a popular revolt against the Bourbon regime in Calabria, which ended tragically. These events heightened both expectations and fears that more upheavals were imminent, while the election in 1846 of a new pope, who was widely believed to be sympathetic to the liberal nationalist program, raised the sense of anticipation to a new pitch. Yet there was little evidence of this enthusiasm in the theaters until the 1848 revolutions were about to start, and it was only once constitutions were granted that music began to take a more overtly political form. In doing so, it moved from the theaters to the streets and the piazzas, as witness the success of the young Mameli's *Fratelli d'Italia*, a patriotic text written in 1847 and set to music shortly thereafter by the composer and patriot Michele Novaro.

Shortly afterwards, the Countess Costanza d'Azeglio heard from her window in Turin Novaro's setting of Mameli's poetry being sung in a nearby piazza. She mentioned this the following day to her son Emanuele (who was in Paris) in a letter, in which she began by expressing her joy on hearing the news that Giuseppe Garibaldi and the defenders of the Roman Republic were holding off the French forces that had been sent to restore Pope Pius IX to Rome. She was delighted that the French had found such strong resistance in a country that had "a detestable military reputation" (une détestable réputation militaire) and was thrilled that their example would enable Italians once again to hold up their heads proudly before the world. But much as she admired the courage and valor shown by the defenders of the Republic, she did not believe that their cause, the Republic, was a good one. She wanted them to put up a good fight, but she also fervently hoped they would be defeated. In closing her letter, she mentioned that from her bedroom on the previous evening she had heard "the distant sound of the last notes of the anthem *Fratelli d'Italia* sung, I believe, by a small group of Piedmontese idiots": "Oh those wretched brothers!" (Oh les vilains fratelli!).[27]

Countess D'Azeglio's dilemma offers a good example of the uncertainties and contradictions attached to nationalism. The pride she took in the courage and valor shown

[26] On Bellini and Pepoli, see, for example, Herbert Weinstock, *Vincenzo Bellini: His Life and His Operas* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1971); John Rosselli, *Life of Bellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[27] Costanza d'Azeglio, *Lettere al figlio (1829–62)*, ed. Daniela Maldini Chiarito, 2 vols. (Rome: Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano, 1996), II: 1008, letter of 18 June 1849: "Hier soir j'ai entendu de ma chamber dans l'éloignement les dernières notes de 'Fratelli d'Italia' [...] 'Oh les vilains fratelli!'."

by the defenders of the Roman Republic illustrates nicely the sensibilities that found expression in the nationalist cause, yet her letter clearly reveals the many different meanings of that cause. Verdi's position seems to have been very similar. As Roger Parker and John Rosselli have argued, despite his initial expressions of support even during the revolutions of 1848 and 1849, his behavior leaves many doubts. In April 1848, Verdi left Paris, where he had been living, and traveled to Milan, where he met Mazzini shortly after the popular uprising (the Cinque Giornate) that had forced the Austrians to abandon (for the moment) their Lombard capital. In spite of his famous claim that this was a moment for the sound of guns not the sound of music,[28] Verdi's next opera, *La battaglia di Legnano*, on a libretto by Salvadore Cammarano, based on Joseph Méry's play *La bataille de Toulouse*. was composed immediately following these events. The opera was first performed in Rome on 27 January 1849, shortly before the proclamation of the Roman Republic. However, even Verdi's most "political" opera does not resolve the question about Verdi's nationalism. Verdi's visits to Italy in 1848 and 1849 were brief, and after the collapse of the revolutions, *La battaglia di Legnano* remained in the repertory, albeit with new titles necessitated by censorial considerations, but without any evident nationalist significance (or success).[29] It was staged in the leading Italian opera houses despite the return of the Austrians, the Pope, and legitimist autocratic rulers. When it was staged in Bologna soon after Unification, it was a resounding flop.

Banti's formulation of Risorgimento nationalism as a cultural discourse is designed, of course, to show that a unified Italy existed in the minds of Italians before it became a reality, that it was a powerful and emotive force that overrode the politics that divided the nationalists.[30] Those claims make assumptions about author intent and audience reception, however, for which neither the opera nor the theater provides much support. Nor is there much evidence that either before or during the revolutions of 1848–49 the opera reached wider audiences or that what took place on the stage spilled over into the streets.[31] In fact, when in 1848, the revolutions moved into the theaters, *La battaglia di Legnano* more or less made its exit, primarily because it was too costly to remain in production. The rulers were keenly aware that this was something for which the theater-going public had low tolerance. In Naples, the revolution was crushed when, on 15 May, the Bourbon army opened fire on peaceful demonstrators right in front of the

[28] See Verdi's letter to Piave of 21 April 1848: "You talk of music to me!! What are you thinking of? Do you imagine I want to occupy myself now with notes, with sounds? There is, and should be only one kind of music pleasing to the ears of the Italians of 1848, the music of the guns!" trans. in Frank Walker, *The Man Verdi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 188.

[29] The opera was renamed *L'assedio di Arlem* in 1852, but met with little success in the theaters. Verdi tried to rework it as *Lida* in the mid-1850s, but subsequently abandoned the project; and in the 1880s the opera was translated into French as *Pour la Patrie* [*Patria*], also unsuccessful. Douglas L. Ipson, "*battaglia di Legnano, La*" and "*Patrie*," in *The Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia*, ed. Roberta Montemorra Marvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50–54, here at 51, and 333, respectively. In 1860, the opera was revived in Parma as *La sconfitta degli Austriachi*; Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), I: 393.

[30] Banti and Bizzocchi, *Immagini della nazione*, 11.

[31] Carlotta Sorba, "Il Risorgimento in musica: L'opera lirica nei teatri del 1848," in Banti and Bizzocchi, *Immagini della nazione*, 133–56; Maria Teresa Antonia Morelli, *L'unità d'Italia nel teatro: Istituzioni politiche, identità nazionale e questione sociale* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2012), 15–65.

Teatro San Carlo: six weeks later, to signal that everything was back to normal, the San Carlo reopened its doors with a production of Verdi's *I due Foscari*.[32]

The single-minded search for a nationalist discourse that proves to be frustratingly elusive should not lead us to overlook the other features of Italian culture and life that were present and evident in the theater and on the stages. If audiences were curiously slow in responding to supposed nationalist allusions, they showed no such reticence when it came to expressing patriotism, municipal loyalties, and rivalries, or to participating in the often rowdy partisanship between competing claques whose disagreements often did spill out into street brawls. By looking too hard for things that were not there, it is easy to miss the obvious. Before 1848, in the theater as elsewhere, nationalism and independence were loosely and inconclusively associated with aspirations to modernity and emancipation and not with a more focused but reductive "discourse." Far from being a constant, nationalist enthusiasms waxed and waned.

Banti's reformulation has helped give Risorgimento nationalism a well-deserved fresh scrutiny that has provided unprecedented opportunities for musicologists and historians of nationalism, literature, music, theater, and visual arts to work together. But Verdi, the theater, and the opera in Italy suggest that without closer attention to the complexities of interpreting author intent and audience reception the "nationalist discourse" risks becoming excessively abstract and overly deterministic.

[32] Davis, "Italy," 209.