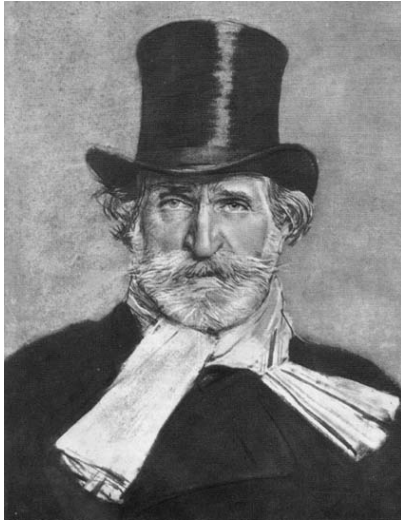




GIUSEPPE VERDI BIOGRAPHY

Introduction



Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi (October 9 or 10, 1813 – January 27, 1901) was one of the most influential composers of Italian opera in the 19th century. Transcending the boundaries of the genre, some of his themes – such as "La donna è mobile" from *Rigoletto*, "Va, pensiero" (The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves) from *Nabucco*, and "Libiamo ne' lieti calici" (The Drinking Song) from *La Traviata*, have long since taken root in popular culture.

Although his work has been criticized for using a generally diatonic (including only notes that are included in a major or minor scale or key) musical idiom, and for having a tendency towards melodrama, Verdi's masterworks dominate the standard repertoire a century and a half after composition. Many of Verdi's operas (especially the later ones from 1851 onwards) are a staple of the standard operatic repertoire, and

his works are frequently performed in opera houses throughout the world. No composer of Italian opera (perhaps with the exception of Giacomo Puccini) has managed to match Verdi's popularity.

The Early Years

Verdi was born the son of Carlo Giuseppe Verdi and Luigia Uttini in Le Roncole, a small village in the province of Parma, Italy. The baptismal register, on October 11, lists Verdi as being "born yesterday," but since days were often considered to begin at sunset, this could have meant October 9 or 10. He was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, in Latin, as Joseph Fortuninus Franciscus. And the day after that, Verdi's father took him to Busseto (which was a part of the French Empire after the annexation of the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza) where the baby was recorded as Joseph Fortunin Francois. The clerk wrote in French, so it happened that for the civil and temporal world Verdi was born a Frenchman. Verdi's parents were both from families of minor traders; his life began in a state of poverty.

In Busseto, when Verdi was only a child, his musical predilections quickly appeared, and he was sent to study with the village organist. Here he was given his first lessons in composition. And when Verdi was only eleven years old, he succeeded his teacher in the post (at a salary of thirty-six francs a year!). His education was also greatly facilitated by visits to the large library belonging to the local Jesuit school.

When he turned twenty, Verdi went to Milan to continue his studies. He took private lessons in counterpoint (the art of combining melodies) while attending operatic performances and concerts of German music. It should be noted that Verdi had made an unsuccessful application for entry as a student at the Milan Conservatory. The precise cause of his rejection has never been made clear, but regardless, Verdi did as well for himself as a private student. It was in Milan that Verdi was convinced he should pursue a career as a theatre composer.

Returning to Busseto, he became the town music master. With the support of Antonio Barezzi (a local merchant and music lover who had long supported Verdi's musical ambitions in Milan), Verdi gave his first public performance at Barezzi's home in 1830. Barezzi loved Verdi's music and invited him to be his daughter's music teacher. Verdi and Margherita (Barezzi's daughter) fell deeply in love and they were married on March 4, 1836. Soon after, Margherita gave birth to two children, both of whom died in infancy. Verdi had adored his children and was saddened that they were taken at such an early age.

Recovering from devastation, in November of 1839, Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*, was realized and achieved a degree of success at Milan's La Scala. Immediately after closing, La Scala's impresario, Bartolomeo Merelli, offered Verdi a contract for two more works. However, while composing his second opera, *Un giorno di regno*, on June 18, 1840, Margherita also passed away (the cause of which has never been determined). Perhaps partially due to his depression, *Un giorno di regno*, performed in September 1840, turned out to be a flop. To make matters worse, Verdi was so poor at this time that he had to pawn his wife's trinkets for the rent. Verdi fell deeper into despair and vowed to give up musical composition forever.

Fortunately Merelli persuaded Verdi to continue composing, and he went on with it while his heart was breaking. As a result of Merelli's cajoling, Verdi wrote *Nabucco*. The opening performance, in March of 1842, is what made Verdi famous. Legend has it that the famous "Va pensiero" (or "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves") was so powerful that during the opera's first rehearsal, all of the laborers throughout the building stopped work and broke into an outburst of applause. This poignant, yearning chorus of a people – dreaming of freedom in their homeland – reminded Italians of their struggle for a unified homeland and made young Verdi a hero. Even in the present day, the "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves," has repeatedly been proposed as a possible Italian national anthem.

The "Galley Years"

During the mid 1840s Verdi composed and produced many operas (fourteen in total). Because he was so busy during this time, he proclaimed this period to be his "galley years". Works of the "galley years" included *I Lombardi* (1843) and *Ernani* (1844). In 1847, Verdi wrote *Macbeth*, which was considered to be his most original and important opera. This was the first time Verdi had attempted an opera without a love story, breaking a basic convention in 19th-century Italian opera. Also in 1847, *I Lombardi* was revised, renamed *Jérusalem*, and was produced by the Paris Opera. Due to a number of Parisian conventions that had to be honored (including the inclusion of extensive ballets), it became Verdi's first work in the French Grand opera style.

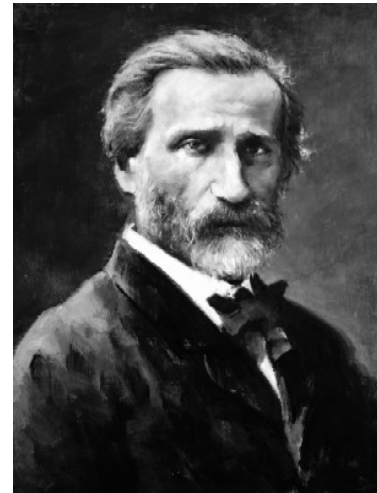
Verdi's personal life also took off again at some point during the mid 1840s; he began an affair with Giuseppina Strepponi, a soprano in the twilight of her career. Although their cohabitation before marriage was regarded as scandalous in many of the places they lived, that did not stop them. Eventually, while living with Strepponi, Verdi purchased an estate two miles from his hometown, Busseto. His parents had owned the property initially, but after his mother's death in 1851, Verdi made Villa Verdi at Sant'Agata his home until his death. Verdi and Giuseppina finally married on August 29, 1859 at Collonges-sous-Salève, near Geneva.

As the "galley years" drew to a close, Verdi created one of his greatest masterpieces, *Rigoletto*, which premiered in Venice in 1851. Based on a play by Victor Hugo (*Le roi s'amuse*), the libretto had to undergo substantial revisions in order to satisfy the epoch's censorship of controversial topics; namely *Rigoletto's* depiction of immoral behavior among royalty. Verdi was on the verge of giving it all up on a number of occasions. However, in the end, the opera quickly became a

great success. With *Rigoletto*, Verdi established his original idea of musical drama. It is a cocktail of heterogeneous elements, embodying social and cultural complexity, and beginning from a distinctive mixture of comedy and tragedy. *Rigoletto's* musical range includes: band-music such as in the first song "La donna è mobile," Italian melody such as the famous quartet "Bella figlia dell'amore," chamber music such as the duet between Rigoletto and Sparafucile, and verses based on key-notes like the C and C# in Rigoletto and Monterone's upper registers.

The Middle Years

After *Rigoletto*, the operas of Verdi's "middle period" followed suit. In 1853, *Il Trovatore* was produced in Rome, and *La Traviata* was produced in Venice. The latter was based on Alexandre Dumas, fils', play *The Lady of the Camellias*. Between 1855 and 1867 there was an outpouring of great Verdi operas, among them such repertory staples as *Un ballo in maschera* (1859), *La forza del destino* (commissioned by the Imperial Theatre of Saint Petersburg for 1861 but not performed until 1862), and a revised version of *Macbeth* (1865). Others (perhaps somewhat less often performed) include *Les vêpres siciliennes* (1855) and *Don Carlos* (1867), both commissioned by the Paris Opera and initially given in French. Today, these two operas are most often performed in their revised Italian versions. *Simon Boccanegra* followed in 1857.



Verdi had a brief stint as a politician, serving in 1863 as (elected) deputy to the newly formed Italian Parliament. Although he was a passionate Italian patriot, Verdi hated politics and did not remain long in the parliament. He was made a lifetime senator by King Victor Emmanuel in 1874, but Verdi only showed up once and that was to take his oath. Verdi was a great disciple of the Italian patriotic movement known as the Italian Risorgimento (ca 1750 – 1879). It strove for Italian unification and a new social order. As a believer in the movement, Verdi wanted the staging, sets and costumes for his opera *La Traviata* to be "modern" in keeping with the contemporary issues of his times. He saw his artistic role as an opportunity to shape the Risorgimento and to help unite Italy, with a common language and no internal boundaries. Verdi was a diplomat who sought to contribute to the Risorgimento through peaceful means.

In 1869, Verdi was asked to compose a section for a requiem mass in memory of Gioacchino Rossini. Alternatively, he proposed that this requiem should be a collection of sections composed by other Italian contemporaries of Rossini. The requiem was compiled and completed, but it was not performed in Verdi's lifetime. In 1874, Verdi reworked his "Libera Me" section of the Rossini Requiem and made it a part of his *Requiem Mass*, honoring the famous novelist and poet Alessandro Manzoni, who had died one year earlier. The complete *Requiem* was first performed at the cathedral in Milan on May 22, 1874.

Verdi's grand opera, *Aida*, is sometimes thought to have been commissioned for the celebration of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. However, according to one major critic, Verdi was asked by the Khedive (governor) merely to write an "ode" for the inauguration of the new opera house (scheduled as part of the canal opening festivities). Perhaps a bit insulted, Verdi turned down the invitation to write something new, and instead the opera house was forced to open with a production of *Rigoletto*. Later in 1870, the organizers again approached Verdi (this time with the idea of writing an entire opera), but he again turned them down. When they warned him

that they would ask Charles Gounod (French composer, best known for his operas *Faust* and *Roméo et Juliette*) instead, and then threatened to engage Richard Wagner's (famous German composer) services, Verdi began to show considerable interest. The agreements were signed in June 1870.

As a side note, Wagner and Verdi – both leaders of their respective schools of music – seemed to resent each other greatly. For example, they never once met in person. Verdi's comments on Wagner and his music were few and hardly benevolent: "He invariably chooses, unnecessarily, the untrodden path, attempting to fly where a rational person would walk with better results." Of Wagner's comments on Verdi, only one is well-known. After listening to Verdi's *Requiem*, the great German, who was prolific and eloquent in his comments on some other composers, said: "It would be best not to say anything." Although competitive, Verdi still admired and respected the work of Wagner. Upon learning of Wagner's death, Verdi lamented: "Sad, sad, sad! ... a name that will leave a most powerful impression on the history of art."

Twilight and Death

During the next several years, Verdi worked on revising some of his earlier scores, most notably *Don Carlos*, *La forza del destino*, and *Simon Boccanegra*.

Otello, based on William Shakespeare's play, with a libretto written by Arrigo Boito (the young composer of *Mefistofele*), premiered in Milan in 1887. Some feel that although masterfully orchestrated, *Otello* lacks the melodic luster so characteristic of Verdi's earlier, great, operas. Its music was "continuous" and could not easily be divided into separate "numbers" to be performed in concert. Additionally, it lacked a prelude, something Verdi listeners were not accustomed to. Many critics, however, considered it to be Verdi's greatest tragic opera, containing some of his most beautiful, expressive music and some of his richest characterizations.

In 1894, Verdi composed a short ballet for a French production of *Otello*, his last purely orchestral composition. Years later, Arturo Toscanini (who had performed as cellist in the orchestra at the world premiere of *Otello*, becoming a dear friend of Verdi's) recorded the music for RCA Victor with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, which complements the 1947 Toscanini performance of the complete opera.

Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff* (libretto also by Boito), was based on Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* and Victor Hugo's subsequent translation. It was an international success and was one of the supreme comic operas which showed Verdi's genius as a contrapuntist (a person skilled at combining melodies). Verdi had met with a modest operatic success before he was long out of his teens, but after sixty years of almost continuous labor, he startled the art world with this consummate masterpiece, written, with all the verve and vitality of youth, when he was eighty.

In 1897, Verdi completed his last composition, a setting of the traditional Latin text *Stabat Mater*. This was the last work of four sacred works in Verdi's *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*. The other three works were: *Ave Maria* for mixed chorus, *Laudi alla Vergine Maria* for female chorus, and *Te Deum* for double chorus and orchestra. Today these pieces are often performed together or separately. The first performance of the four works was held on April 7, 1898 at the Grande Opéra in Paris.

In Milan, on January 21, 1901, Verdi had a stroke. He gradually grew more feeble and died six days later, on January 27, 1901. At the state funeral for Verdi in Milan, Arturo Toscanini

conducted the vast forces of combined orchestras and choirs comprised of musicians from throughout Italy. To date, it remains the largest public assembly in the history of Italy.

It required a strong character to live the life that Verdi lived; to preserve at the end of eighty-seven years that freshness of interest, that intensity of purpose, that industry which characterized him almost up to the last. The explanation may be partly found in his humble origin, his simple upbringing, and the ascetic regularity of his adult existence. Verdi went to his rest crowned with honors, the most striking phenomenon that the history of opera has to record.

Notes on Style

Verdi's predecessors who influenced his music were Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and most notably, Gaetano Donizetti and Saverio Mercadante. With the possible exception of *Otello* and *Aida*, Verdi was free of Wagner's influence. Although respectful of Gounod, Verdi was careful to learn nothing from the Frenchman whom many of Verdi's contemporaries regarded as the greatest living composer. Some strains in *Aida* suggest at least a superficial familiarity with the works of the Russian composer Mikhail Glinka, whom Franz Liszt (after his tour of the Russian Empire as a pianist) popularized in Western Europe.

Some critics maintain that Verdi paid insufficient attention to the technical aspect of composition because he lacked schooling and refinement. Verdi himself once said: "Of all composers, past and present, I am the least learned." He hastened to add, however, "I mean that in all seriousness, and by learning I do not mean knowledge of music."

Testament to his acumen, Verdi never underestimated the expressive power of the orchestra or failed to use it to its full capacity when necessary. Orchestral and contrapuntal innovation was characteristic of Verdi's style and his orchestrations were often masterful. Therefore Verdi relied heavily on his melodic gift as the ultimate instrument of musical expression. In many of his passages and especially in his arias, the harmony was aesthetic, with the entire orchestra occasionally sounding as if it were one large accompanying instrument (like a giant-sized guitar playing chords). As a specific example, in *Rigoletto* the chorus hums six closely grouped notes backstage to very effectively portray the brief ominous wails of the approaching tempest. Verdi's innovations were so distinctive that other composers do not use them; they remain, to this day, Verdi's signatures.

Verdi was one of the first composers who insisted on patiently seeking out plots to suit his particular talents. Working closely with his librettists and well aware that dramatic expression was his forte, he made certain that the initial work upon which the libretto was based was stripped of all "unnecessary" detail and "superfluous" participants. Only characters brimming with passion and scenes rich in drama remained.

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