Of Time and the City:
Verdi’s *Don Carlos* and Its Parisian Critics

FLORA WILLSON

The summer of 1900 saw Paris flooded with visitors to its latest Exposition Universelle. As at previous international exhibitions, innovation (especially technological innovation) was center stage, the march of progress materialized for all to see. But far from the star attractions—the moving pavement or Rudolph Diesel’s new engine—and the gaudy spectacle of belly dancers, foreign dignitaries, and armies of uniformed workers was a more sober gathering: the International Congress on Music History, held at the Bibliothèque de l’Opéra.¹ To coincide with the congress, Charles Malherbe, the Opéra’s archivist, had decided to mount an exhibition of his own. His idea was to assemble a collection of musical autographs to be displayed as a survey of the masterpieces, compositional practices, and great men of music past and present. The historical section comprised around 500 sketches and finished works drawn from the Opéra’s library; alongside them were the same number of musical manuscripts (both excerpts and vignettes written for the occasion) solicited from living composers. About half were by Frenchmen, ranked according to institutional status. The rest, as *Le Monde artiste* boasted, were by the finest composers “de tous les pays.”²

Such claims of universality must be read in light of the geographical biases of those imperialist times—as a musical analogue, perhaps, of the stylized national pavilions then lining the banks of the Seine. But among manuscripts sent from the farthest reaches of northern and eastern Europe was one that had originated much closer to home. Giuseppe Verdi, in the final months of his life as the century turned,

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¹The event was one of many conferences held under the auspices of the Exposition, dedicated to particular specializations and professions, from comparative history to the medical press.

²"Une exposition d’autographes musicaux à l’Opéra,” *Le Monde artiste* (29 July 1900), 477.
responded to Malherbe’s request with a brief extract from his 1867 Parisian grand opera, Don Carlos. Framed by the Art Nouveau laurels and roses common to all the manuscripts displayed, and headed by a miniature sketch of the Exposition as seen from the Seine, Verdi’s album leaf consists of the first fourteen measures (in French, and in vocal score) of the act IV Duo between Philip II of Spain and his blind, ninety-year-old Grand Inquisitor (see plate 1). The bottom right-hand side of the page, marked “S. Agata giugno 1900,” bears the composer’s signature—the distinctive flourish now crabbed with age. There are oddities in the notation, strongly suggesting that Verdi wrote from memory. In the most striking, Philip’s “Eclairez-moi” in m. 9 is intoned on a single G, rather than falling to C on its final syllable; at the change of system the offbeat chords providing the tinta of the Duo’s first section vanish prematurely, leaving blank staves in their place.

Of the contributions submitted by Verdi’s compatriots, the majority were either miniatures composed for the occasion or short pieces written out in their entirety. The exceptions were a handful of other operatic extracts: Giordano sent an excerpt from Fedora (1898); Mascagni a nine-measure fragment from Guglielmo Ratcliff (1895); Puccini the first six measures (in full score) of the bell-saturated Lento depicting the Roman sunrise in act III of Tosca—a work premiered only months earlier and not to be performed in Paris for another three years. Displayed after these submissions of recent works from the younger, more self-consciously modern generation of composers, at the very end of the Italian album, Verdi’s contribution stands out. It was not only extracted from a significantly older work, but also from an opera directly linked to Paris rather than from one of Verdi’s apparently unassailable Italian masterpieces. What is more, by July 1900 Don Carlos had not been staged in the French capital for over thirty years. Nor had the opera’s Italian variants in four and five acts fared much better on the international stage, at least since the mid-1880s. Verdi’s fourteen-measure extract thus-aspired implicitly to iconic status while referring to an opera that was largely forgotten. It presented above all an image of operatic remembrance; the trace, in memoriam, of a work recalled from another era. The manuscript encapsulated, in this sense, what Richard Terdiman has called “the present past”—memory as a past always re-presented, always mediated by the twin mechanisms of remembering and forgetting.

This article focuses on opera’s own “present past”: on the ways in which a sense of collective memory and an increasing valorization of the operatic past played out in the later 1860s. It is no accident that, precisely at this time, Baudelaire formulated his conception of modernité as “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent”; nor that what Terdiman calls the “memory crisis”—a rupturing of the previously assumed continuity between past and present—

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"The original, five-act Don Carlos received forty-three performances at the Opéra between 11 March and 11 November 1867 but did not enter the repertory there or in other operatic centers. Apart from two gala performances, staged principally as a vehicle for Feodor Chaliapin at Paris’s Gaîté Lyrique in May 1911, the opera was not heard again in Paris until a major revival in 1963. Giorgio Gualerzi identifies a quarter century, from the premiere of the four-act Italian version in 1884 to a spate of revivals in the 1910s, during which the opera was barely performed in any version, either in Italy or elsewhere. Its most recent appearance at the time Verdi dispatched his album leaf to Paris in June 1900 had been a single outing at La Scala on 6 February 1897. Milan’s Rivista teatrale melodrammatica (8 Feb. 1897), 2, condemned it as an “inaudito fiasco,” albeit mostly because of the poor quality of its performance. See Gualerzi, “Un secolo di Don Carlos,” in Atti del IIo congresso internazionale di studi verdiiani [Parma: Istituto di studi verdiiani, 1971], 497–98.

Plate 1: Giuseppe Verdi, *Don Carlos*, act IV, sc. 2; album leaf for the Exposition Universelle [Paris: Bibliothèque-Musée de l’Opéra, 1900].
and an attendant questioning of the mechanisms of memory itself—started its ascent to a fin-de-siècle climax in the 1860s, with the period’s newly “disciplined obsession with the past” a means by which to “reconceive modernity.” Underlying what follows—explicitly discussed only at certain junctures—is a broad concern with opera’s place in the particular, much-discussed Parisian modernity of the 1860s. In general terms I want to address the persistence of the old [and even the old-fashioned] alongside the self-consciously new in Parisian modernity, in the process arguing for the continued importance of grand opera at a time when historiographic attention has tended to shift to more obvious instances of operatic “modernity” located elsewhere.11 More specifically, my article is about how critics responded to a new grand opera, Verdi’s Don Carlos, at its premiere in Paris in 1867. It is about the modes of listening that we can infer from these critical accounts; and about the ways in which those modes might be understood in the context of far-reaching changes to operatic practice.12

Against this large-scale historical backdrop, the Duo that Verdi chose to exhibit in Paris in 1900 will emerge as especially significant. Not only was this number central in Verdi’s first reception [when the piece constituted a major catalyst of critical self-contradiction], but it is also a moment to which we might productively listen again, in which we might unearth traces of the musical stimuli to which critics responded so strikingly in 1867.

In short, I want to suggest that the Duo encapsulates and makes explicit many of the tensions underlying the operatic culture in which Don Carlos was first produced—above all those between the vast, imposing repositories of the operatic past, and any new work’s potential immortality in the future. In this self-consciously “modern” milieu, the task of listening in the present—as a critic or anyone else making judgments, prognoses, and predictions—became a mediation between these past and future tenses. Placing the Duo as a particular, even paradigmatic moment in dialogue with the discourse surrounding the opera as a whole, and reading it simultaneously as a musical product and an object of critical process, I thus seek to elucidate both the internal workings of the musical memory that Verdi presented to Paris in 1900 and, more broadly, the role the Duo—and Don Carlos—played in the emergence of a specifically operatic modernity.13

LISTENING IN PARIS

I begin, however, with the work’s much-awaited first performance at the Opéra, on 11 March 1867. As the institution’s latest premiere, and

10Terdiman, Present Past, 5, viii.
11My article is thus in some sense a response to Antoine Hennion’s accusation that French opera has too often been written as “the history of the winners”; see “Rewriting History from the Loser’s Point of View,” in Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu, ed. Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 342.
12James H. Johnson’s groundbreaking Listening in Paris: A Cultural History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) has little to say about operatic listening practices. As his narrative of increasingly silent, attentive listening unfolds, his tendency is to focus on the concert hall and its predominantly German canon. Within Johnson’s epistemological framework, opera is positioned largely as the “other” (and a bad one at that) to a canon of instrumental works, with grand opera in particular understood as a genre in which stage spectacle was essential but distracting. When he does identify opera audiences listening attentively, the experience is couched in terms of a similarity to the primary repertoire of “absolute” music. Thus Rossini’s works occasioned a “silent revolution”—but did so because they “made audiences listen to music, not as imitation or image or emotion, but as sheer music” [225–27]. For a trenchant critique of Johnson’s study, see Mary Ann Smart’s review in this journal 20 (1997), 291–97. The book is nonetheless an important early contribution to its field and has informed much of my basic conception of changes in nineteenth-century listening habits, just as it has influenced many who have recently sought to explore the overlap between reception history and a more explicitly embodied history of listening.
13An obvious precedent for such a project is provided by Lawrence Kramer, Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), in which Kramer examines, among other things, the late-nineteenth-century status of Wagnerian opera, describing it as “for many opera lovers the decisive event of European modernity” [107]. Wagner was, as I shall discuss, a major presence in the early reception of Don Carlos, and was so precisely as a byword for what was most “modern” in the opera. However, what I am attempting is slightly different: to seek traces of operatic modernity in a work by a composer largely without Wagner’s avant-garde credentials, and in an operatic subgenre already thought conservative, even in danger of obsolescence.
especially as a commission from Europe’s most popular opera composer, *Don Carlos* was greeted by a capacity audience in the Salle Le Peletier. Many prospective attendees (some of them critics) were turned away; stories circulated of outrageous sums paid even for makeshift folding seats. Expectations had been heightened by *Don Carlos*’s painfully slow progress toward the stage. Delays were often a feature of new productions in a genre defined by its scale and complexity, and those to *Don Carlos* accumulated almost from the outset. Verdi signed the contract in July 1865, the subject, based principally on Friedrich Schiller’s 1787 drama, was agreed as early as November of that year; by March 1866 the libretto was finished and composition had begun. Rehearsals started in August, but a month later Verdi was already complaining that “we progress but, as always at the Opéra, at a snail’s pace,”14 and that the opera probably would not make its scheduled December premiere. Three months later *Don Carlos* was complete and fully orchestrated (except the ballet); Verdi predicted that it might reach the stage in mid-January. But rehearsals continued, eventually numbering over two hundred (with no less than eight general rehearsals), as the Opéra’s famously resistant “machines of marble and lead” ground on.15

Yet even once the doors of the Salle Le Peletier were finally opened to those lucky enough to possess a ticket, hearing Verdi’s new opera in its entirety was by no means assured. As Nestor Roqueplan—one-time director of both the Opéra and Opéra-Comique and, more successfully, editor-in-chief of the high-circulating daily *Le Figaro*—confessed, apparently without embarrassment:

We do not report on the first act of *Don Carlos* for the very simple reason that we haven’t seen it. The poster gave the starting time of the show as 7:30 p.m., which, in keeping with standard practice, seemed to give the audience half an hour’s grace in which to arrive. But on this occasion the management didn’t indulge its attendees. The curtain rose and the show began at the precise time given, despite the noise from the doors of the boxes and despite the deafening silence from the empty stalls, whose velvet-covered arms seemed raised in protest.16

For all that its genesis had been dogged by lateness, *Don Carlos* thus made its debut unexpectedly early—a practical measure necessitated by its formidable length. Michel Savigny reported in *L’Illustration* that the premiere, despite having begun with uncommon precision, nevertheless finished at half-past midnight. Since its establishment as a genre in the 1830s, grand opera had been famous for its hyperbolic proportions, with performances regularly continuing into the early hours. Even recent additions were generally cast in the same mold:

15“Macchine di marmo e di piombo”; the phrase is Giuseppina Strepponi’s, from a letter written on 7 December 1866 to Mauro Corticelli, quoted in Interviste e incontri con Verdi, ed. Marcello Conati (Milan: Formichiere, 1980), 56. The opera’s genesis and early production history have generated a small Verdian industry. The work exists, famously, in several versions. In this instance, and for obvious reasons, I refer throughout to the five-act French-language Paris version of 1867. For one account of the different versions, with accompanying bibliography, see Harold S. Powers, “Verdi’s *Don Carlos*: An Overview of the Operas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, ed. Scott Balthazar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 209–36. The complexities of the opera’s long genesis are also admirably summarized in Budden’s chapter on *Don Carlos* in *The Operas of Verdi*, III, 3–157.
Meyerbeer’s _L’Africaine_, premiered posthumously at the Opéra in April 1865, ended (not without critical grumblings) at nearly 1:00 a.m.\(^{17}\) It goes almost without saying that an attendant feature of the genre was the need for revisions and—above all—cuts, both before and after the premiere. The fact that Verdi’s new work proved at least as expansive as its predecessors was thus, in one sense, a matter of a composer fulfilling the obligations of his contract [not to mention competing with the genre’s existing behemoths]. The grand-opera template of four or five acts plus full-length ballet was modifiable only in certain preordained ways, as Wagner had discovered at his cost in 1861.\(^{18}\) Yet _Don Carlos_’s length nevertheless elicited countless column inches—far more than any other recent premiere, _L’Africaine_ included. Indeed, what had been a common but peripheral theme in the reception of Meyerbeer’s work became almost the only aspect of _Don Carlos_ on which critics were unanimous. Henri Rochefort flippantly asked in _Le Figaro_, “Can a Frenchman safely withstand five hours of music?”\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\)Nearing the close of his almost forty-year career, critic Joseph d’Ortigue declared of _L’Africaine_ that “La musique . . . est en général admirable. Le spectacle est admirable aussi; mais un opéra qui commence à sept heures un quart et qui s’achève à une heure moins un quart après minuit, un tel opéra défie la mesure de l’attention et des forces humaines.” _Journal des débats_ (6 May 1865), 1.


\(^{19}\)”Un Français peut-il, sans danger, supporter cinq heures de musique?” _Le Figaro_ (13 March 1867), _DdP_, 21.

Eugène Tarbé self-diagnosed acute boredom during the course of his multiple review articles,\(^{20}\) Gustave Chadeuil, music critic for the republican _Le Siècle_, was adamant that “five hours of music exceed human strength for listeners-turned-martyrs.”\(^{21}\)

For all this attention to the length of Verdi’s new opera, there were wild discrepancies between press reports: from the five hours cited by many, to six hours reported by Roqueplan, to four hours counted by Hippolyte Prévost and Achille Denis.\(^{22}\) The official log for the opera’s last general rehearsal on 9 March records that it lasted from 7:18 p.m. until 12:20 a.m., which makes clear that the most widely reported length was indeed accurate, albeit with reference to the entire evening, intervals included, rather than to Verdi’s score alone.\(^{23}\) Nonetheless, the sheer frequency of complaints suggests that _Don Carlos_’s length was as much symbolic as actual: that its precise duration (around three and a half hours of playing time after the final, large-scale cuts made before the premiere) was less important than the general perception of its _longueurs_. This situation arose against a two-fold operatic backdrop: on the one hand, the audience’s prior experience and knowledge of Verdi’s Italian operas, and on the other—what we must address first—the particular (and changing) status of grand opera itself.

**Long Operas**

It was not only grand opera’s inflated scale that had persisted as the century wore on. The genre’s prestige also remained largely constant, with its official residence, the Opéra, still rec-


\(^{21}\)”Il faut avouer aussi que cinq heures de musique dépassent les forces humaines pour les auditeurs devenues martyrs.” _Le Siècle_ [19 March 1867], _DdP_, 125.


\(^{23}\)Two of the Opéra’s official reports of general rehearsal timings are reproduced in Ursula Günther’s introduction to _The Complete Edition of Don Carlos by Giuseppe Verdi_ (Milan: Ricordi, 1974), 4.
ognized as the premier stage in Second Empire France, perhaps even in the world. Nonetheless, for all that grand opera’s claim to occupy the top of the Parisian operatic order endured through the 1860s, seemingly oblivious to the potential for theatrical regime-change enabled by the 1864 Liberté des Théâtres bill, other developments were in train both at the Opéra and elsewhere in the city. From the mid-1850s onward, the number of performances staged annually by the Opéra increased significantly, from around 130 to between 170 and 194 for the remainder of the Second Empire (and indeed the century). The great majority were evening-length single works—which is to say, grand operas—rather than the mixed programs of shorter operas and ballets that had once predominated. Of those grand operas staged, the majority were now works written some decades previously. To put this another way, by the late 1860s, the Opéra had a fully fledged repertoire of largely homegrown classics. New works continued to be produced, generally appearing at the steady one-a-year rate mostly sustained since the early 1830s; but few recent additions enjoyed a prolonged afterlife. Even a cursory glance at the 1860s playbills makes it clear that, with the partial exception of Le Prophète (Meyerbeer, 1849), the cornerstones of the Opéra’s repertoire were distinctly weather-beaten: La Muette de Portici (Auber, 1828); Guillaume Tell (Rossini, 1829); Robert le Diable (Meyerbeer, 1831); La Juive (Halévy, 1835); Les Huguenots (Meyerbeer, 1836); La Favorite (Donizetti, 1840).

Alongside these monuments, three other operas were performed frequently during the 1860s. The first was Verdi’s Le Trouvère, a French adaptation of Il trovatore (1853), premiered at the Opéra on 12 January 1857, following the success of the Italian original at the Théâtre Italien two years earlier. This transfer to the Opéra marked the popularity of Verdi’s Italian works—the middle-period ones above all—in Second Empire Paris, a point to which I shall return. The second was Meyerbeer’s L’Africaine, premiered on 28 April 1865. Such posthumous timing—just under a year after the composer’s death—lent the production an unmistakable in memoriam quality, which accounted in part for its domination of the stage during the rest of the year and its continued (if increasingly sporadic) reappearance in subsequent decades. Yet more significant than its impact on the reception of L’Africaine, however, was the general ill-omen of Meyerbeer’s demise, which seemed to leave the genre without a figurehead—and without an immediate source of new masterpieces to add to the repertoire.

It is in this context that we can most productively see the third of these “other” 1860s repertory works: Mozart’s Don Giovanni, which had been staged as Don Juan at the Opéra several times—and in several versions—since 1805. A major revival in 1866 was particularly high profile (it appeared in place of a new commission that year) and has attracted significant scholarly attention, not least due to its near-

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25 I take these figures from Hervé Lacombe, “L’Opéra sous le Second Empire” and is also evident from the sheer number of performances listed in the online database Chronopéra: http://chronopera.free.fr/ (accessed 15 April 2013).

26 As another symptom of broader changes in Parisian operatic culture, the notion of the “classic” was in transition in the mid-nineteenth century; see Flora Willson, “Classic Staging: Pauline Viardot and the 1859 Orphée Revival,” Cambridge Opera Journal 22 (2010), 301–26.
coincidence with stagings of the work elsewhere in the city. In this Mozart revival, then, as in its 1861 production of Gluck’s *Alceste*, the Opéra extended its repertoire by looking backward, across the revolutionary caesura, as an alternative to the continued production of new works that tended to sink all too quickly from view. What is more, as Hervé Lacombe has recently observed, at the same time that the Opéra was suffering this “displacement” from its old position at the innovative center of operatic Paris, two recently opened theaters were offering new competition. Jacques Offenbach’s Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens (established in 1855) became the generic headquarters of the *opérette*. A more serious rival, however, was the Théâtre Lyrique, which opened in 1847 (initially as the Opéra National) and enjoyed a significant rise in prestige under the leadership of Léon Carvalho between 1856 and 1860. Carvalho produced successful new works such as Gounod’s *Faust* (whose revival at the Opéra in 1869 was met, tellingly, with considerable anxiety about the relative status of the two theaters and of grand opera as a genre) and also a series of major revivals of *anciens chefs-d’œuvre*. Retrieved from the distant musical past, these works—by Mozart and Gluck, Rameau, and Grétry—gained the Lyrique a reputation, for better or worse, as an operatic museum.

In 1866 *Don Giovanni* was performed in Paris in three almost simultaneous, high-profile productions: at the Théâtre Italien (from 2 March), the Opéra (from 2 April), and the Théâtre Lyrique (from 9 May). For a recent reflection on this operatic convergence, see Mark Everist, *Mozart’s Ghosts: Haunting the Halls of Musical Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 77–91. Gibbons’s discussion of *Alceste’s* reception in 1861 places the revival on both sides of this temporal divide: he sees the production as a tentative step toward the conversion of the Opéra into a “Louvre lyrique” as called for by certain critics, but also as providing the discursive battle-ground for a critical confrontation with Wagner’s “musique de l’avenir” immediately following *Tannhäuser* (“Music of the Future, Music of the Past,” especially 239–45). Lacombe, “L’Opéra sous le Second Empire,” 159–61.

The nineteenth-century rise of historicism and the musical canon as manifest in instrumental music has long been a subject of musicological interest. The foundational theoretical text is Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). William Weber’s work on changing trends in concert programming complements this with archive-driven investigations; see his *The Great Trans-

formation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Much less attention has been focused on operatic culture’s turn to its past from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The strongest case thus far for the cultivation of an operatic canon in mid-nineteenth-century Paris is made by Ellis, “Systems Failure in Operatic Paris.” Anselm Gerhard makes the important point that although internationalism characterized the Opéra in the mid-nineteenth century, it was not typical of the Parisian cultural milieu. He suggests, following Arno J. Mayer, that such operatic internationalism was “an attitude surviving from the ancien régime among the privileged social classes who could afford the luxury” (Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 392).

For more on French musical nationalism in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, see Steven Huebner, *French Music at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Verdi aside [and following the death of Meyerbeer in 1864], Offenbach was the only major non-French figure still composing original works for Paris at this time; see Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera*, 394.

The Parisian scene in which Verdi found himself during the mid-1860s was, then, one in the midst of gradual but significant change. The Opéra remained—for now, and for a few decades to come—at the top of the theatrical hierarchy; but that hierarchy was itself shifting as the focus in operatic culture came to rest ever more emphatically on established masterpieces, rather than the continual production of new works. In addition (and more specific to the Opéra), from around the death in 1864 of Meyerbeer, grand opera’s cosmopolitan *éminence grise*, the internationalism that had once characterized the genre gradually waned. This was clearly in line with the growing chauvinism of France’s cultural climate—an atmosphere that would persist well into the next century, sustained by the increasingly nationalist imperatives of political strife and international conflict.

**DON CARLOS; OR, LISTENING TO “LE VERDI NOUVEAU”**

It is in these two contexts—of growing institutional preferences for established works on the one hand, and for French works on the other—particularly significant that *Don Carlos* was the last nineteenth-century Opéra commission awarded to a composer of foreign origin. When approached by Émile Perrin for a new work...
The victory of Wagner was, perhaps inevitably, cited as the modernizing impetus; but almost as ubiquitous was Meyerbeer—half Wagner's compatriot—who was imagined by Max Berthaud to “pass before [Verdi] as though haunting him like a ghost.”

Almost every Parisian critic identified the new opera as an important stylistic shift away from the masterpieces of Verdi’s [Italian] back catalogue. Wagner was, perhaps inevitably, cited by many as the modernizing impetus, but almost as ubiquitous was Meyerbeer—half Frenchman, half Wagner’s compatriot—who was personally invested critics voiced a widespread feeling that Don Carlos, however progressive in musical language, lacked the life force of “le Verdi italien, le vrai Verdi.” Roqueplan went so far as to address the composer directly: “be wary of making progress; they accuse you of trying to be less Italian in order to become a bit German. If, when departing from Italy, some Germans left their music behind, it must be returned to them.” With its less than subtle reference to Italian unification, the subtext of this and similar comments is easily discerned. In accordance with an old stereotype, Italians des tonalités, des coupes, dont Meyerbeer tirait un admirable parti, il ne s’est pas aperçu qu’il prenait seulement un corps inanimé; ce qui n’était pour Meyerbeer qu’une façon, qu’un moyen, qu’un cadre, Verdi en a fait le but et le tableau lui-même [Le Figaro [17 March 1867], DdP, 27–28].

Perrin’s initial letter, dated 11 July 1865, suggests a commission directly linked to the forthcoming Exposition Universelle: see Ursula Günther, “La Genèse de Don Carlos,” Revue de musicologie 58 (1972), 23. I have come across no official connection between Verdi’s commission and the Exposition, although the composer was presented with a commemorative exhibition medal on the occasion of Don Carlos’s premiere, see Franco Abbiati, Giuseppe Verdi, 4 vols. [Milan: Ricordi, 1959], IV, facing 592. Had Verdi’s opera reached the stage as early as he had hoped, the two events would have been separated by several months; in the event, the delays at the Opéra resulted in a premiere only a fortnight before the Exposition’s official opening.

Théophile Gautier—Romantic-by-association and, of necessity, a prolific hack—was for once typical in his assessment that “Verdi a modifié complètement ses précédés premiers pour adopter des principes analogues à ceux du maître allemand” [Théophile Gautier, Le Moniteur universel [18 March 1867], DdP, 104].

Roqueplan, L’Art musical [28 March 1867], DdP, 213.

Verdi himself had little patience with such accusations of Wagnerisation: “I am an almost perfect Wagnérisation: I am an almost perfect Wagnerian. But if the critics had paid a bit more attention, they would have noticed that the same kind of ideas are present in the terzetto from Ernani, in the sleepwalking scene from Macbeth and in so many other pieces” [letter to Léon Escudier [1 April 1867], quoted in Budden, The Operas of Verdi, III, 26]. Verdi’s own claims notwithstanding, the relationship between him and Wagner has enjoyed a long and richly contested afterlife in opera studies. One often-cited volume is Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner, ed. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989]. For a more recent take on Verdi’s Wagnerismo, see Roger Parker, “In Search of Verdi,” in Remaking the Song: Operatic Visions and Revisions from Handel to Berio [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006], 67–89.

Berthaud, Revue contemporaine [March-April 1867], DdP, 192.

There was, though, widespread disagreement about whether Verdi should be encouraged in this “voyage d’Allemagne.” Although some argued that Don Carlos showed increased sensitivity to orchestral color, the work’s supposed Wagnerisation was in general much maligned. Despite remaining supportive of its house composer, L’Art musical [owned by Verdi’s French publisher, Léon Escudier] admitted that the new work represented “an unexpected step into the uncharted territory of the future.” Less personally invested critics voiced a widespread feeling that Don Carlos, however progressive in musical language, lacked the life force of “le Verdi italien, le vrai Verdi.” Roqueplan went so far as to address the composer directly: “be wary of making progress; they accuse you of trying to be less Italian in order to become a bit German. If, when departing from Italy, some Germans left their music behind, it must be returned to them.” With its less than subtle reference to Italian unification, the subtext of this and similar comments is easily discerned. In accordance with an old stereotype, Italians des tonalités, des coupes, dont Meyerbeer tirait un admirable parti, il ne s’est pas aperçu qu’il prenait seulement un corps inanimé; ce qui n’était pour Meyerbeer qu’une façon, qu’un moyen, qu’un cadre, Verdi en a fait le but et le tableau lui-même [Le Figaro [17 March 1867], DdP, 27–28].

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Théophile Gautier—Romantic-by-association and, of necessity, a prolific hack—was for once typical in his assessment that “Verdi a modifié complètement ses précédés premiers pour adopter des principes analogues à ceux du maître allemand” [Théophile Gautier, Le Moniteur universel [18 March 1867], DdP, 104].

Roqueplan, L’Art musical [28 March 1867], DdP, 213.

Verdi himself had little patience with such accusations of Wagnerisation: “I am an almost perfect Wagnérisation: I am an almost perfect Wagnerian. But if the critics had paid a bit more attention, they would have noticed that the same kind of ideas are present in the terzetto from Ernani, in the sleepwalking scene from Macbeth and in so many other pieces” [letter to Léon Escudier [1 April 1867], quoted in Budden, The Operas of Verdi, III, 26]. Verdi’s own claims notwithstanding, the relationship between him and Wagner has enjoyed a long and richly contested afterlife in opera studies. One often-cited volume is Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner, ed. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989]. For a more recent take on Verdi’s Wagnerismo, see Roger Parker, “In Search of Verdi,” in Remaking the Song: Operatic Visions and Revisions from Handel to Berio [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006], 67–89.

Berthaud, Revue contemporaine [March-April 1867], DdP, 192.

Roqueplan, L’Art musical [28 March 1867], DdP, 213.

Berthaud, Revue contemporaine [March-April 1867], DdP, 192.

Roqueplan, Le Constitutionnel [18 March 1867], DdP, 100.
should get on with what they do best—being pleasantly melodic—leaving to the French and Germans the harmonic mastery needed to forge their parallel routes into the future.45

Yet even though Don Carlos was often heard as the product of “un Verdi nouveau, réformé,”46 the opera was rarely thought to demonstrate a thoroughgoing compositional overhaul. Indeed, many complained that the work was stylistically disparate. Moments of unadulterated Italian melody were heard to emerge from a complex mass of German and French forms, harmonies, and dramatic situations; Verdian manners old and new jostled uncomfortably for space.47 Calculating that fully three of Verdi’s Italian operas would fit into the duration of the new work, L’Illustration opined that “the piece lacks unity, concision; it doesn’t hang together, it’s too dense.”48 This judgment is revealing in several ways. Although it gestures once more toward Don Carlos’s length, it shifts to the realm of perception: the new opera was not only three times as long as one by the old, Italian Verdi, but also three times as heavy. The emphasis is less on the work’s duration than on how much is packed into it—on how long it felt.

Needless to say, the fact that the work was entirely unknown was probably crucial to such judgments. As Chadeuil put it, such was the novelty of Verdi’s opera that any attempt to take in the gamut at a single sitting was enough “to make you feel almost dizzy, to make you fear apoplexy.”49 As the Opéra’s succession of new works was gradually superseded by those already established, audiences became increasingly accustomed to music they knew well: to acknowledged masterpieces. That several of these were by Verdi is likely to have had a significant impact on the reception of his new work. Indeed, for all that Don Carlos was felt to be too long on its own terms, it was also heard as part of a still lengthier procession of Great Works: one that reached further back into the past than Verdi’s own most popular operas while at the same time projecting, hopefully, into an imagined future. With Don Carlos, the author of so many existing classics was understood (and understood himself to be) composing for posterity—and was attended to accordingly.

Reporting to his friend Opprandino Arrivabene on the morning after the premiere, Verdi admitted that his new work had not been a success; but he also added, “I don’t know what the future may hold, and I wouldn’t be surprised if things were to change.”50 It was in this spirit that the usually pro-Italian music critic Alexis Azevedo closed his damning review with a question echoed by many others: “What will be the fate of Don Carlos?”51 Yet such looking ahead came under direct fire from reactionary quarters. La Semaine musicale’s Louis Roger insisted that he felt no need to appeal to the future for a verdict on Verdi’s new opera: “It was written for us, I assume, and so we are within our rights to judge it. With this approach, no fourth-rate composer can claim also for himself the right to call on the

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45That potential non-Italian future could also be configured in distinctly negative terms; see, for instance, Pierre Véron’s complaint that “lui aussi, Verdi, le maître de l’inspiration et de la mélodie, il s’est mis à sacrifier aux faux dieux de l’algèbre musicale. En croirai-je mes oreilles? Il a wagnéréisé!” (Savigny, Le Ménestrel [17 March 1867], DDP, 237).

46Gustave Bertrand, Le Ménestrel [17 March 1867], DDP, 237.

47For a recent study of Don Carlos along such national lines—in this case focused on Verdi’s skillful approach to French versification in his treatment of Méry’s and Du Locle’s libretto—see Andreas Giger, Verdi and the French Aesthetic: Verse, Stanza, and Melody in Nineteenth-Century Opera (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), especially 182–207.

48“L’œuvre manque d’unité, de concision, d’effet d’ensemble, elle est trop touffue” (Savigny, L’Illustration [16 March 1867], DDP, 49).

49“C’est à se sentir près de vertige, c’est à redouter l’apoplexie” (Chadeuil, Le Siècle [19 March 1867], DDP, 125). Such difficulties were in part caused by Don Carlos being even more unknown than previous grand operas at their premieres: Verdi had objected to the Opéra’s custom of allowing the press to attend general rehearsals.

50Letter from Verdi to Arrivabene [12 March 1867]: “Non so cosa sarà in seguito, e non mi sorprenderei se le cose cangiassero” (cited in Annibale Alberti, Verdi intimo: Carteggio di Giuseppe Verdi con il conte Opprandino Arrivabene [1861–1886] [Verona: Mondadori, 1931], 75).

51Azevedo, “Quel sera le destin de Don Carlos?” L’Opinion nationale [19 March 1867], DDP, 149.
judgment of posterity. This significantly simplifies the task of the critic.”

As Roger hints, the critic’s responsibilities in assessing a new grand opera had become ever more unwieldy. An inclination toward provisional judgments, with appeals for more time and further hearings, had been building for decades and cannot be explained simply by the increasing complexity of new works, or even by changing attitudes to music criticism. Rather, critics’ growing anxiety was symptomatic of a larger epistemological shift, consisting of several main components: belief in the value of sustained concentration when confronted with a difficult new work; acknowledgment of longevity as a sign of true greatness; the realization that all critical assessments must inevitably remain subject to revision. The shift may first have occurred in relation to German instrumental music during the early years of the nineteenth century, but it gradually spread to opera, with the career of Rossini’s Guillaume Tell (1829) as one milestone. Yet beyond the gathering absorption of operatic works into “serious” musical discourse, and even in comparison to the most recent high-profile premieres of other grand operas, Don Carlos seemed to give rise to an epidemic of critical insecurity.

La Liberté exemplified the tone: “We have only seen Don Carlos once, and we can only discuss with extreme caution a major work in five acts, which was until this evening entirely unknown to us.” Part of the reason was plainly that demand for rapidly produced copy and up-to-date reports in daily newspaper publishing was at odds with the imperatives of musical criticism as practiced by the late 1860s. Those writing feuilletons, longer series of articles in weekly or monthly papers, and thus able to make repeat trips to the Opéra, congratulated themselves on the advantage won. Jacques Sincère, for instance, writing a month after the premiere, boasted that “four hearings and a detailed reading have familiarized us with the score’s intricacies.”

Sincère’s confidence was nonetheless highly unusual among Don Carlos’s critics, even those writing at some temporal distance from the first performance. As the anxieties of his less self-assured colleagues betray, there was a bigger underlying problem. As already mentioned, Don Carlos had from the very start been treated as a potentially canonical opera. Once this putative masterpiece reached the stage, it seemed to demand an altogether different mode of listening: one that both acknowledged and enabled the new work’s altered relationship to time. Within this mode, Sincère’s four proudly boasted hearings were merely the beginning of
a much longer process. In the words of the prominent Parisian critic Benoît Jouvin,

It doesn’t take five hours to hear [entendre, so also “understand”] a piece: depending on how many new delights are contained within a score to which the ear must acclimatize, it takes five years, ten years, thirty years to listen to it. We’ve been striving to listen properly to Le Prophète for the past 18 years; 32 years for Les Huguenots; 39 years for Guillaume Tell; 80 years for Don Giovanni... Music’s pleasure lies in the triumph of memory... Everything that is unexpected in music, everything which, to fulfill our desires, renews it, revolutionizes its forms, is an obstacle placed before the floodgates of memory.58

In contrast to those who reached for other operas against which to measure Don Carlos’s length, Jouvin’s model conceptualizes modern operatic consumption as a process far removed from the duration of individual performances. Concerned principally with operas already consecrated in a still-forming canon (Mozart’s Don Giovanni was the timeless masterpiece par excellence, however prone to modification it proved on the nineteenth-century Parisian stage), Jouvin preaches effortful, committed attention to works that will give up their secrets with time alone. He describes a hyperextended experience of what we might call “canonic” listening: an experience only afforded by truly great works, but redeemed by “the triumph of memory.” Jouvin’s paradigmatic listener, and the many critics who in 1867 adhered to similar principles of prolonged, slow judgment, aspired to cultivate, even embody, the collective memory of the operatic canon.

Operatic culture’s own “memory crisis” [to gesture once more toward Terdiman’s conceptualization]—that is, its self-conscious turn to

the past in mid-nineteenth-century Paris—thus coincided, in hindsight, with its own modernization: to listen in this way was to be part of an imagined continuum of experience joining the operatic past and future. Above all, however—and it is here that the friction between operatic modernity and its more widespread urban counterpart emerges most clearly—to practice such canonic listening was to feel oneself divorced from an increasingly malign part of the here and now: from the clock time of everyday life.

LISTENING AT RAILWAY SPEED

Writing in 1859, John William Cole suggested that, “Now, we are all alike; ever in a hurry, on the one high road of utilitarianism, thinking, travelling, and sleeping at railway speed.”59 Cole’s diagnosis of an era obsessed with its own speed was widespread at the time and has since become a trope of nineteent-century cultural and urban history. Second Empire Paris, a metropolis rivaled in size and embrace of modernity only by Cole’s London, styled itself as a city in which “living quickly is a way of living life to the full”; as Alfred Delvau proclaimed in 1866, “Better to die at 30 in Paris than in a village at 100.”60 But accelerated living had unpleasant side effects. The second half of the century witnessed a torrent of medical accounts detailing the consequences of high-speed urban existence. It also invented the idea of “fatigue”61 and gave rise to Charles Baudelaire’s notion of “spleen,” which colored the city’s sense of ennui in the face of such relentless activity. Parisian modernity was, in other words, imagined from its inception as an era in which the gathering pace of industrial production and the so-called railway revolution represented unstop-

58On ne met pas cinq heures à entendre une partition:—suivant que cette partition est plus ou moins remplie de beautés neuves auxquelles l’oreille doit se familiariser, on met cinq ans, dix ans, trente ans à l’écouter. Voilà dix-huit ans passés que, l’oreille tendue, nous écoutons le Prophète; trente-deux ans, les Huguenots; trente-neuf ans, Guillaume Tell; quatre-vingts ans, Don Juan... Le plaisir que donne la musique est la fête de la mémoire... Tout ce qui est imprévu en musique, tout ce qui, pour triompher de notre satiété, en renouvelle, en révolutionne les formes, est un obstacle placé devant une des portes de la mémoire” [Jouvin, Paris-Magazine [17 March 1867], DdP, 74].


60“Vivre vite... est une façon de vivre beaucoup... Il vaut mieux mourir à trente ans à Paris qu’à cent ans au village” [Alfred Delvau, Les Heures parisiennes [Paris: Librairie centrale, 1866], 5].

pable, inhuman (even dehumanizing) forces. These growing machine powers threatened increasingly to overwhelm the city's long-established but now-fragile boundaries of class, gender, politics, and topography, to saturate all aspects of urban existence—including that bastion of elite culture which was the Opéra.62

In view of this high-speed mentality, an oft-repeated story about the Don Carlos premiere merits further investigation. On 24 February 1867, over a fortnight before the opening night, the first general rehearsal took place. According to the Opéra’s official report, proceedings began at 7:11 p.m., and the curtain fell five hours and twelve minutes later, at 12:23 a.m. As a result, Verdi made several ruthless cuts to his score, deleting the introduction to act I and also shortening two duets in act II. Achille de Lauzières, Paris correspondent of the Gazzetta musicale di Milano, reported the sequence of events as follows:

In Paris the duration of operas is fixed, and this rule cannot be broken. The show cannot go on beyond midnight because the last train for the suburbs and the outlying districts leaves at 12:35. For the convenience of those who live in the suburbs or the environs of Paris the show must be shortened so as not to go on past midnight. The curtain cannot go up any earlier, either, since no one wants to make opera-goers hurry their supper! All these considerations of rather menial, not to say downright slavish factors have induced, or rather forced [Verdi] to shorten the music by a quarter of an hour.

The hardest thing [for Verdi] was to find a way of shortening [the opera]. Everything is designed for the placing of effects and for the requirements of the lyric drama. . . . A sad necessity that sacrifices a work’s integrity to such puerile considerations! How can one cut out a quarter of an hour of music, above all from an opera whose merit—out of the thousands that it can boast—lies in the speed of its action? Verdi did not take any pleasure in repeating the same phrases, as was the custom with older writers—and with many of the modern ones. As he had in view the dramatic action above all, he gave this his chief attention, and does not let it drag by the common devices which so many composers employ, sacrificing dramatic truth to ephemeral and facile, but illogical, musical effects.63

Lauzières’s much-quoted first paragraph imagines Don Carlos precisely as one might expect: in uneasy relation to the temporal frameworks and pressures of everyday life in 1867 Paris. Or rather, as nobly at odds with the petty, mundane concerns of the Parisian operagoing public. It is also clear that in Lauzières’s explanation the tensions between Verdi’s work and its urban milieu are reinflected through political and personal sympathies: the young nation’s favorite composer struggles under the excessive, inflexible demands of the French (and this at a time when Napoleon III’s armies were still stationed in Rome to protect the Pope, thus preventing the final stages of Italian unification).

63The rehearsal report for 24 February is also reproduced in Günther, The Complete Edition of Don Carlos, 4.
This fantasy of suburban gourmands refusing to change their supper habits or to make alternative arrangements for their journey home has proved seductive. So much so that those repeating Lauzières’s story have overlooked its political subtext, passing on its details as unquestioned “fact.” More interesting in the present context, however, is Lauzières’s second paragraph, which is often omitted in modern retellings. Here he places Verdi’s new work in more complex dialogue with what we might call operatic modernity: the modernity that gave birth to the new mode of canonic listening discussed above. Particularly striking in this context is Lauzière’s idiosyncratic insistence on the opera’s pace—the “rapidity dell’azione.” Not content simply to figure it as the victim of a temporal regime governed by Gallic whim, he imagines Don Carlos as having achieved in its own right that true marker of Parisian urban modernity: speed. In so doing, Lauzières clearly seeks to strengthen his defense of Verdi’s long opera, perhaps gesturing negatively toward the bloated, unwieldy form of the five-act spécialité du pays. Yet, more importantly, his argument rests on the idea that what might appear long (and thus ripe for cutting) to the uninitiated will be revealed as both concise and rapidly paced to those who really listen.

Lauzières’s second paragraph thus marks a productive encounter between the established lexicon of grand opera and that other great marker of operatic modernity: its developing notions of an operatic work-concept. As depicted by Lauzières, Verdi’s opera foregrounds dramatic imperatives and becomes a work in the strong, instrumental-music sense: founded on conceptual unity, built to last and under no circumstances to be modified for trivial reasons. Yet at the same time that critics such as Lauzières could approach a new grand opera qua work, the Opéra’s reliance on enforced cuts was necessitated by its adherence to an older status quo: the weighty four- and five-act forms; the integral ballet; the refusal either to begin performances earlier or to reduce the number of intervals. The institutional “machines of marble and lead” were once more proving resistant, on this occasion to conceptual change wrought by progressive elements of its own audiences. Understood in this way, the staging of Don Carlos marked a moment of significant tension at the Opéra: between long-established practices of production and new frameworks for reception.

Once again, therefore, in Lauzières’s diatribe as in Jouvin’s model of canonic listening, it was not exactly Verdi’s grand opera that was incompatible with the timetables of modern Parisian existence. The greater difficulty in this regard originated in how the new work was conceived by forward-thinking commentators. For supporters of a recently established operatic order, Don Carlos was a prospective masterpiece demanding both intense attention from its listeners, and respectful, minimally intrusive treatment from its business-minded, clock-watching midwives. Yet the sustained concentration required by the new operatic regime was by definition out of step with the tempo of the mid-nineteenth-century city. At least as they were exposed in Lauzières’s and Jouvin’s accounts, two symptoms of modernity—time-tabled circulation and the operatic canon—reached deadlock. Of course, in a city ever more preoccupied with its acceleration into the future, the lengthy process of canonic listening (afforded by an operatic culture ever more preoccupied with its own past) was almost bound to be problematic. What is more elusive, and yet may bring us closer to unpicking the critical dilemma of Don Carlos in 1867 Paris, is how these tensions—between an increasing engagement with the past and a desire to see (or hear) into the future, to forecast the judgment of posterity—are manifest in Verdi’s music.
This article began with an artifact dating from a particular moment in the afterlife of *Don Carlos*. In 1900 the opera was over thirty years old; its composer, approaching ninety, was living witness to precisely the operatic posterity that had been the object of such attention in 1867. The pool of classics that had been accumulating in the late 1860s was, by the turn of the century, a more or less stable reservoir—and one in which Verdi was well represented. But *Don Carlos*, premiered as a potential masterpiece, was entirely absent. Thus when Verdi sent his contribution to Malherbe’s 1900 Exposition, he left an operatic calling card that few would have recognized. As such, the less sentimental Verdian might look on it as a mildly aggressive memorandum addressed to the forgetful audiences of operatic Paris. Yet there is more we might now glean from Verdi’s *carte de visite*: as an object embodying a meeting of memory and experience, past and present; as a symbolic mediation between the various pasts and potential futures of *Don Carlos* itself; above all, as a written trace of particular meanings potentially accumulating around the musical passage that the aging composer had chosen.

In his response to Malherbe’s request, as to Emile Perrin’s commission decades earlier, Verdi seems once more to have defied expectations. He could, after all, have provided an excerpt from one of his ever-popular, middle-period Italian works, perhaps “La donna è mobile” or “Amami Alfredo.” Alternatively, he could have chosen one of the few numbers from *Don Carlos* still circulating. Instead, though, Verdi sent the opening of his act IV bass Duo between Philip and his Grand Inquisitor. Immediately arresting here is that, although by 1900 the Duo had disappeared from popular view along with its operatic vessel, Verdi had emphasized the number’s significance from the opera’s earliest stages. Not only was it one of two scenes that he had requested be imported from Schiller at the start of negotiations with the Opéra in July 1865, but fully fifteen years earlier, in a letter to Salvadore Cammarano, he named the encounter as one of the greatest attractions of Schiller’s play as a potential subject. Even after *Don Carlos*’s premiere, the composer continued to see his “Inquisitor scene” as a crucial moment, insisting in a letter to Giulio Ricordi in 1869 that it was “elevated somewhat above the other pieces [in *Don Carlos*].” Well over a decade later, preparations for the premiere of the Milan version saw him repeatedly highlighting the importance of the bass roles: “you’ve only told me about the Philip, but watch out: if you want this opera to have the performance it deserves, and which it has never had in Italy, the Inquisitor and the Monk must also be excellent. Look closely at the libretto and the score, and you’ll see that those three are the actors and the motors of the opera. All the rest is framing.”

According to Verdi’s own reading, then, the struggle for supremacy waged by two of his three “motors” in the Inquisitor’s scene is central to the entire opera’s dramatic effect. Even more telling than the composer’s repeated avowals of the scene’s importance is that the Duo was one of the very few pieces to remain entirely unaltered during his later revisions of *Don Carlos*. Keen not to become outmoded even in his increasingly conservative

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67 Verdi quoted by Günther, “La Genèse de *Don Carlos*,” 30. [For Escudier’s report to Perrin, which is slightly more detailed than Verdi’s letter, ibid., 25.] The other scene specifically requested by Verdi was the act II duet between Philip and Posa.

68 The likelihood of difficulties with the censor warned Verdi off the subject for the time being, with *Re Lear* yet again an alternative—one never to be realized, of course: “Il *Don Carlos* mi piacerebbe lasciando in tut[t]a la sua integrità e sublimità il carattere del Posa, e la scena dell’Inquisitore con Filippo. Tutto ciò è impossibile per la censura, poi è soggetto troppo vecchio” (unpublished letter from Verdi to Cammarano [6 May 1850], listed in Sotheby’s sale catalogue for 6 June 2013 [London, 2013], item 138).

69 Letter from Verdi to Giulio Ricordi [7 Aug. 1869], quoted by Chusid, “The Inquisitor’s Scene,” 505.

old age, Verdi took the opportunity while preparing the four-act Milan (1884) version to make both large- and small-scale modifications: most often to update numbers that he judged old-fashioned. Yet the Grand Inquisitor, it seems, was already—was still—entirely modern enough: he had already beaten his path toward the musica dell’avvenire in 1867. In short, the historical image encapsulated in Verdi’s 1900 album leaf was a double one: it represented not only a forgotten moment from the composer’s own musical past but also a particular incarnation of Verdian modernity.

It is significant in this context that, even at the opera’s premiere, the scene was regarded as semantically complex, its symbolism multiple and contradictory. Given that it was a single short number during a long evening, Verdi’s Duo attracted surprising attention: the vast majority of critics mentioned the scene, even in relatively brief reviews. Yet what stands out above all, in a reception marked by disagreement on virtually every aspect, is that the Duo was almost universally praised—albeit with little consensus on precisely what made it good, or on how such positive verdicts connected to any broader critical stance. Paul de Saint-Victor judged the opera’s fourth act to be sustained by inspiration, opining that Verdi had “translated superbly [Schiller’s] somber dialogue”; and yet he also complained of the similar political themes of Philip and Posa’s act II duet, that “this speechifying music is ultimately wearisome: we’d exchange [Posa’s] best rhetorical discourse for a scrap of melody.”

Saint-Victor’s views seem only more peculiar because his accusation of tedium is leveled not at one of the opera’s more obviously “Teutonic” moments (the usual cause of critical ennui), but at the Philip-Posa duet—a piece significantly more Italianate, in this first version at least. Many critics acknowledged the revolutionary, modern qualities of the fundamentally unconventional act IV Duo: Jouvin welcomed it as “a revelation in Verdi’s manner” while, in one of the few negative judgments, Johannes Weber complained that “it isn’t a duet, but a long dialogue between basses, over symphonic workings in the orchestra.” Yet in several cases the Duo was extolled by the same critics who elsewhere denounced the “Verdi nouveau.”

Ever Verdi’s champion, Lauzières went so far as to proclaim the piece—despite its formal irregularities—a “modèle du genre.” Other critics heard the number not as a product of the latest compositional style but as a “historical scene”, even, along with Philip’s aria that precedes it, as “a piece of history.”

This wide spectrum of critical opinion in 1867, with its often self-contradictory assessments of the act IV Duo in relation to those of Don Carlos as a whole, might be read in two connected ways. On the one hand, it could simply be a further symptom of the changing demands on music critics: a by-product of the problematic meeting of the ever-expanding print media industry (embodied above all in the daily newspaper, with its rapid turnover and promise of immediate reportage), and the emphatically slow, canonic listening already discussed. On the other hand, the striking array of positive but contradictory descriptions and assessments points toward the Duo’s ambiguous status: even before Verdi’s bold dramatic dialogue had existed for long enough to be forgotten, the piece was the site of significant hermeneutic confusion. Here, then, we might usefully turn to the Duo’s musical surface, above all to its iconic,

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71"L’inspiration du maître . . . se soutient au quatrième acte . . . Le Duo du compositeur traduit admirablement ce sombre dialogue" [Saint-Victor, La Presse [18 March 1867], DdP, 111].


73"Le meilleur morceau de cette partition" [Hans Deb, Le Masque [21 March 1867], DdP, 172].

74Thémines [pseud.: Lauzières], La Patrie (18 March 1867), DdP, 93.

75"La scène historique du roi et de l’inquisiteur" [Bertrand, Le Ménestrel [17 March 1867], DdP, 237].

tinta—establishing opening section: the very material by which the composer chose to be represented and displayed to visitors to the Opéra, just months before his death.

LISTENING TO THE GRAND INQUISITOR

In its action and libretto the Duo follows closely the equivalent scene in Schiller’s play. It takes place in Philip’s study, directly after the dawn monologue in which the King despairs that his wife, Elisabeth, does not love him. Exhausted by this interior drama, Philip is roused by the announcement of a visitor. The ninety-year-old, blind Grand Inquisitor enters, having been summoned to give him counsel. Philip explains that his son, Don Carlos, is a political rebel, can his murder be justified? Would the Church absolve Philip of sin, were he to commit filicide? The Inquisitor reassures the King, reminding him that God sacrificed his own son. But then he shifts the dialogue toward his own agenda: the true threat, he says, is Posa, the freedom fighter with whom the King has recently formed an unlikely friendship. Philip, angered, attempts in vain to deflect these accusations; the Inquisitor reminds him that even kings are subject to divine law. Philip proposes a reconciliation, but the Inquisitor remains noncommittal. The scene ends with Philip, left alone, protesting that even royalty must bend to the wishes of the Church.

Musically the number unfolds in three large sections: an ABA form in which the second A section is much curtailed, with clear framing gestures at the start and finish (see ex. 1, which contains the opening thirty measures of the first A section). The Duo begins with three portentous Cs. Forte, accented, and delivered in unison across the middle register of the winds and brass, they announce the Count of Lerma, who in turn heralds the entrance of the Inquisitor. It closes in similar fashion, with three tonic [F-minor] chords, now pianissimo and in the bass. The two outer sections are dominated in the libretto by Philip: he applies to the priest for license to kill his son in the first; and he attempts reconciliation and cries out in defeat in the second. The middle section is given over almost exclusively to the Inquisitor and comprises a series of short, musically discrete segments. Each is precipitated by an attempted interruption from Philip and is differentiated by key, tempo, and musical material, describing a large-scale crescendo and accelerando as the priest becomes increasingly irate.

In comparison to the through-composed narrative progress of the B section, the outer sections are remarkably static, based around repetitions of sparse musical material and returning at their close to the F minor in which they began. Musical interest is located primarily in the play of low-lying pianissimo orchestral sonorities. The main thematic material is a four-measure, legato melody in bassoon, contrabassoon, cellos, and basses, the circling movement of which characterizes the section as a whole. Set against this are chains of offbeat suspensions in the trombones, themselves punctuated by what Frits Noske famously termed the “musical figure of death” in the timpani and bass drum. This thematic complex is repeated (complete or in part) five times, in each case accompanying utterances by Philip and in each case modulating—first to the tonic major, then to more distant keys. As the tessitura rises, the suspensions shift from trombones to horns, cornets, and trumpets (m. 16). This modified instrumentation serves to emphasize an opposition between the opening material and a new, contrasting, chordal figure (first heard in m. 20) in which trombones are especially prominent: a sequence of four closely spaced half-note triads, which progress by third-relations from the tonal area reached by the principal thematic complex. Always underpinning statements by the Inquisitor, the sequence appears three times

77Act IV, sc. 2, of the opera corresponds with act V, sc. 10, of Schiller’s 1787 play. Despite the widespread alterations and simplifications made by Verdi’s librettists elsewhere in the opera, many of Schiller’s lines in this particular scene appear almost entirely unmodified in the libretto. For a detailed study of the relationship between the opera’s libretto and Schiller’s play, see Jennifer Jackson, Don Carlos: Narrative Transformation in the Works of Abbé de Saint-Réal, Friedrich Schiller and Giuseppe Verdi (Weinsberg: Lucie Galland, 2008).

Example 1: Don Carlos, act IV, sc. 2 (mm. 1–30).
in full [m. 20; m. 24; m. 28], but it is obviously prepared in some sense by the similarly orchestrated half-cadence onto C major at mm. 14–15. Setting into relief the shifting orchestral colors of the Duo’s opening section come the vocal lines of the antagonists. Bare and syllabically declaimed on repeated notes, the pitches of which pass, ever higher, between the voices, the dialogue lacks any sense of vocal lyricism or even character differentiation. Instead, the melodic shapes recall psalm intonation; the cadences in particular are overtly psalmodic, rising or static for questions, falling for statements issued.

The reminiscences of an ancient liturgical style (in the trombone suspensions, in the vocal declamation) point toward the most obvious interpretation of the contrasts of instru-
mental sonority in this first section. The opening thematic complex is not simply diatonic and quasi-contrapuntal, but ecclesiastically so: it exhibits a collection of relics from the distant musical past. Spliced into and working against this representation of the old is the sequence of third-related triads, their elliptical harmonic movement above all a symptom of musical modernity. One might push this interpretation further, mapping onto this juxtaposition the clash of patriarchal forces—Church and State—enacted on stage. The ancient, blind Inquisitor enters to the accompaniment of a theme whose dark tinta and slow progress are comfortably at one with his own persona, its clear traces of the musical past indicative of his stubborn adherence to tradition. Reading further the section’s thematic oppositions, one might see Philip pitted against him, the King inhabiting a more recent harmonic universe, the one containing the chromatic, third-related chord progressions. This interpretation makes attractively transparent an opening sequence that was subject to such wildly differing (if mostly laudatory) assessments at the opera’s premiere—and which has continued to inspire richly divergent readings. Yet, however persuasive, this is an interpretation that ignores several important details of the scene’s construction. One element potentially resistant to the labeling of the main thematic material as symbolic of “the old” is the centrality within it of the contrabassoon sonority, an obvious recent addition to the orchestra that—in true grand opera style—epitomized the progress of instrumental technology. Similarly complicating is the prominence of the trombones in those modern-sounding third-related triads: few instruments were marked more consistently by semantic affiliation with the sublime, the supernatural, and the ancient. More problematic still, though, is any sustained attempt to read the rival figures on stage in conjunction with the oppositions of this orchestral backdrop. For all that the Inquisitor’s entrance coincides exactly with the first statement of the main thematic complex, and that its marked hieratic qualities seem inevitably to illustrate him, his voice is almost never heard alongside it. Instead, this material repeatedly accompanies Philip. Furthermore, the Inquisitor is audibly central to—even the harmonic linchpin of—the sequence of chromatic triads that punctuate and contrast with it, rotating as they do around the pitch of the priest’s monotonous declamation. In place of an easy equivalence between the individual characters and “their” opposing musical material, then, we find apparent misalignment.

The question raised by the colliding semantics of the Duo’s opening is, however, not so much that of which material is proper to the Inquisitor, but of what place is left for Philip in a resonant landscape inhabited almost exclusively by his antagonist. The musical interactions between the two characters in this opening section are, in short, both complex and unstable. This is not an operatic duet in any conventional sense, any sense with which the “Verdi italien, le vrai Verdi” had so often worked. Its musical material, so imbued by contrast, cannot be divided neatly into two semantic portions, nor even be equally shared between performers. Resisting any attempt at fixed, linear interpretation, Verdi’s music instead seems marked by the ambiguities inherent in operatic modernity itself. It is a piece at

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79 The scene has been subject to considerable attention from modern Verdi scholars. The most recent series of excavations was carried out in four papers presented as a roundtable at the “Verdi 2001” conference by Peter Brooks, Joseph Kerman, Harold S. Powers, and David Rosen; see Fabrizio Della Seta, et al., Verdi 2001: Atti del convegno internazionale, 2 vols. [Florence: Olschki, 2003], II, 613–62.

80 Indeed, in this minor-mode, bass-saturated context, with frequent melodic leaps of over an octave, it is tempting to hear echoes—unremarked by the opera’s first audience—of the most famous bass role then in the repertoire, the voice of the past par excellence: Mozart’s Commendatore. The resonance is made more appealing by the fact that the five-act French version of Mozart’s opera by Deschamps and Castil-Blaze produced by the Opéra in 1866 saw the role of “Le Commandeur” taken by Joseph David, the singer who would create Verdi’s Inquisitor a year later.
once concerned with the past and the future—and one that brings together musical signifiers of both in shifting, complex ways.

LISTENING TO THE PAST [2]

As already discussed, the act IV Duo was greeted at the premiere with a peculiar mixture of explicit critical confidence and striking inconsistencies that seem to gesture toward underlying [if unacknowledged] confusion. It was both a “model of the genre” and “a long dialogue between basses, over symphonic workings in the orchestra”; it was perfectly Schillerian yet (mostly) escaped the charge of being “germanisé.” Jouvin called the scene Verdi’s “German adventure”; but it was as frequently heard as a journey into the musical past as into the [Wagnerian] future; it was understood to encompass both a “revelation in Verdi’s manner” and “a piece of history.” What caused such difficulties in 1867 was surely how to deal hermeneutically with the simultaneous presence of the musical past and of sustained glances toward the future; how to sort the new from the old. Perhaps significantly, it was in attending to the same problematic meeting of musical tenses that, only a few years later, Verdi himself would trumpet forth his famous exhortation: “Let’s return to the ancient: that will be an advance.” In short, the challenge presented by *Don Carlos* lay in listening to such semantically multivalent, unconventional iterations of established forms, encased within a work that itself emerged, awkwardly, on the horizon of operatic modernity.

What at once complicates and clarifies this situation is that the act of listening to *Don Carlos* in 1867 was marked by the same array of ambivalences and concerns that characterized Verdi’s score, and above all his act IV Duo. One listener who recorded his experience of the Inquisitor’s scene in striking terms was Théophile Gautier. He was, like the majority of his colleagues, much taken with the scene: setting such political and religious dialogue to music was no mean feat, and Verdi had done so in a masterly manner, he was particularly impressed by the “profonde sonorité” of the contrabassoon. But he also made a more unusual observation, reporting that “the duet between Philip II and the Grand Inquisitor . . . fills almost the whole fourth act.” Gautier’s statement is, of course, very wide of the mark, managing as it does to consign to oblivion a considerable span of music. Yet we might read the error as a sign of his personal struggle with the piece: a sign that his sense of its duration, like the wildly differing estimates of the opera’s length discussed earlier, was ultimately symbolic, born of its complexity. One might even read Gautier’s comment as evidence of his absorption in the piece, one further way in which to understand the widespread confusion over Verdi’s Grand Inquisitor. Perhaps Gautier and his colleagues were concentrating so determinedly on the new, unexpectedly difficult opera—were listening as slowly as they could to the premiere’s all-too-fleeting progress—that they missed much of what was happening. In a final twist of the collision of old institutional pressures and new modes of reception, Verdi’s
grand opera was a work at once too modern and too old-fashioned. Turned simultaneously toward the past and the future, in 1867 Don Carlos had only the weakest of footholds in the present.

Here we can come back one last time to the temporal workings of Jouvin’s model of canonic listening—of a process taking years rather than hours. To follow its precepts required those attending and assessing Don Carlos either to listen through an imagined, projected musical future or to renounce the notion of critical judgment in the present. As so many critics admitted in 1867, only time would tell. In one sense, such impatience to reach the insights of a future age might constitute a further symptom of Parisian “railway speed”: in an era of increasingly commodified time, it was hardly practical to wait eighty years to file a review of the next theatrical masterpiece. Operatic and urban modernity were once again at loggerheads. One might, though, reverse the terms here, extending the logic of progress not forward into a much-awaited future, but backward into the receding past. There was, in the end, an important obverse effect of “railway speed” in the 1860s. Not only did the pace of present existence appear to be accelerating, just as important was that the past was becoming characterized by sluggishness. History itself—that recently discovered archive from which would be forged the operatic future—was gradually slowing down.

My earlier discussion of Lauzières’s idiosyn-

This is an idea implied in Lewis Mumford’s conception of the “doctrine of progress” [by which, if progress is assumed to exist, “if the cities of the nineteenth century were dirty, the cities of the thirteenth century must have been six centuries dirtier”] and stated explicitly by Stephen Kern, who suggests that “accelerating technology” both “speeded up the tempo of current existence and transformed the memory of years past, the stuff of everybody’s identity, into something slow.” See Lewis Mumford, Technics and Civilization [with new preface by Langdon Winner] (1934; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 183; and Stephen Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918 [with new preface] (1983; rpt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 129.

86John Deathridge has described Don Carlos as a “sprawling melancholic drama of the baroque . . . , which explores the human soul in slow motion and at the same time allows for sudden and swift changes of direction in the action” [Wagner Beyond Good and Evil [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008], 86].

87See also Jacques Derrida’s gloss, that, “for Baudelaire, it is the order of memory that precipitates, beyond present perception, the absolute speed of the instant” [Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], 48].

For all that it was a work either praised or denigrated by so many critics because of its “modern” qualities, Don Carlos had a far more persuasive claim to a place in operatic modernity: as a work whose reception was saturated with concerns born of canonic listening. Grand opera, a genre emerging around the time that operas first began to be thought of consistently as musical works, died out as that epistemological shift reached its final destination: in the twentieth century’s solidified canon of works preserved from an ever more distant operatic past. But unlike those other sprawling, now largely forgotten operas with which it shared the Parisian stage in 1867, Don Carlos is a work still regularly performed today. In Second Empire Paris, Verdi’s final grand opera was a
work that afforded an experience seemingly irreconcilable with the practices of everyday life in modern Paris; it demanded an altogether slower mode of consumption just as urban life seemed to be accelerating wildly. Yet the very notion that listening might be brought to a standstill—a notion that reached its own zenith in the analytical zeal and operatic edition-making of the later twentieth century—is only possible under the particular imperatives of a specifically operatic modernity: of a cultural climate founded on the vast collective memory known as the canon, of an operatic system of production concerned above all with the preservation of its own glorious past. That system of production was just becoming entrenched as Verdi arrived in Paris in the mid-1860s with his new work, commissioned under the old rules but heard according to the new. Decades later, at the turn of the century and the end of his long life [his final return to Paris made in thought rather than deed], he sent the opening measures of Don Carlos’s bass Duo as an aide-mémoire for a forgotten opera: measures that introduce that ancient, circling melody played by bassoon, contrabassoon, and trombones. As memorialized in Verdi’s spidery hand, that melody is revealed not only as an instant from the musical past: it is also a moment of listening brought to a standstill—a glimpse of its own, hallowed resting place in a time yet to come.

Abstract.

When Don Carlos premiered at the Paris Opéra in March 1867, there was considerable excitement among critics about the prospect of a new work from one of Europe’s most famous and popular living composers. In the event, the opera’s reception was riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions. The fundamental problem was the work’s ambiguous position: as a new grand opera appearing at a time when Parisian operatic culture was centered ever more on old masterpieces. Moreover, the new work’s length [although characteristic of its genre] seemed ill suited to performance in Second Empire Paris, where the pace of life was felt to be constantly accelerating. In this article I ask how and why Don Carlos—a work judged by many critics to be the epitome of “modern” Verdi—was so at odds with broader conceptions of Parisian modernity. Focusing particularly on the Act IV Duo between Philip II and the Grand Inquisitor, I explore how aspects of the scene’s musical unfolding foreground tensions between an increasingly prominent operatic past and an imagined operatic future. Ultimately, I argue that the opera’s reception was saturated with concerns about an emerging phenomenon of “canonic listening”: an ideal encounter with music extending over countless repeated hearings and predicated on the value of sustained, concentrated engagement with a complex musical surface. Keywords: Don Carlos, Verdi, grand opera, Paris, canon