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Smart, Mary Ann

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Anti-Historical, but Nonetheless There...

Verdi, ‘Tutte le feste’ (Gilda), *Rigoletto*, Act II

MARY ANN SMART*

A song without a date presents a special challenge. In the quest to explore how the music we write about mattered to a specific group of historical listeners, a common – even compulsory – first move is begin with a laser focus on a place and a moment in time to assemble a detailed and concrete picture of the surroundings in which that music was performed and heard. Through an intuitive process of triangulation, the music historian can zero in on events, opinions, sensory details; gradually constructing a densely populated landscape of social and material signifiers related, sometimes obliquely, to the musical works or practices from which she began. Without a date, though, this apparently logical and natural research plan is derailed: the advanced search function in Google Books cannot be harnessed to yield up those intriguing, slightly alien nuggets of commentary; nor can the music in question be pencilled into a chronology that might also list battles, scientific discoveries or obscure inventions.¹ With such possibilities for exegesis and imaginative interconnection withdrawn, the music historian may feel a kind of *horror vacui*, a panic induced by the realisation that the only options left are to hazard an educated guess, to devise some non-bankrupt way to generate meaning from features of the music (itself) or to write about something else altogether.

That, at least, captures something of my own reaction when I realised that it would be impossible to establish solid dates of creation or performance for the *objet trouvé* I’ll consider here. This bit of music has a history that dates back to 1966, or to 1873, or to 1851, depending on how you count it. It was in 1966 or thereabouts that the Italian folk singer and songwriter Rudi Assuntino captured on tape a haunting rendition of a famous melody by Giuseppe Verdi sung by a group of villagers in Medicina, a rice-growing town east of Bologna.² His recording project was part of a many-pronged attempt to collect and archive Italian political song, organised by the Institute for Ethnography and Social History at the University of Bologna and a new Milanese

* Mary Ann Smart, University of California, Berkeley; masmart@berkeley.edu.

¹ My thoughts here are inspired in part by Benjamin Walton, ‘Quirk Shame’, *Representations* 132 (2015), 121–9. Walton’s article and some other contributions to the forum on ‘Quirk Historicism’ in *Representations* 132 implicitly acknowledge that the research trajectory I describe here is one that is most common among historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music.

² The song’s text appears on the site *Il Deposito*, an archive of Italian political and protest songs, which is where I first came upon it (www.ildeposito.org/archivio/canti/la-morte-del-padre-ugo-bassi). Assuntino’s recording is included on the LP *Camicia rossa: Antologia della canzone giacobina e garibaldina* (Dischi del Sole, DS 1117/19, 1979) and can be heard on YouTube where one can also find a more burnished, high-art performance from 2008 by the Turin-based Coro Michele Novaro.

magazine, *Il nuovo canzoniere italiano*. But Assuntino and his associates were, of course, collecting songs with long histories, and this Verdian contrafact can be traced back at least to the 1870s, when a Florentine press printed a broadsheet containing its lyrics under the title ‘The Death of Father Ugo Bassi, priest with Garibaldi, executed by the Austrians in Bologna on 15 June 1849’.³

As the Florentine broadsheet’s heading narrates, Ugo Bassi was a priest and a patriot, executed in 1849 by the Austrians. He had served as army chaplain under the liberal pope Pio IX; when the pope drifted to the right and parted ways with the patriots, he fought with Garibaldi’s forces outside Rome. After the defeat of the revolution in 1849, Bassi was captured and executed by firing squad in Bologna. He quickly joined the pantheon of patriotic heroes, memorialised in historical paintings and in the enormously popular anthologies of lives of the modern martyrs.⁴ The song’s lyrics differ depending on the source, but all three versions purport to capture Bassi’s thoughts in an extended moment just before his death. The song recorded by Assuntino in the 1960s shares its first stanza and refrain with the 1873 song sheet. As the condemned cleric confronts death, he fixes his thoughts on his love for Italy and his desire for vengeance against the invaders:

Eccomi giunto a morte,
il viver mio è cessato,
sol per amar l’Italia
io venni a condannato.

Il mio sangue è innocente;
vendetta tremenda,
dal cielo discende,
dal crudo uccisor.

I am facing death,
my life has ended.
For my love of Italy
I am condemned to death.

My blood is innocent;
terrifying revenge
will descend from heaven
from the cruel murderer.

In later verses, the version recorded in *Medicina* leans towards an orthodox Catholic stance (with lines about kneeling before the virgin, but also cursing Austria), where the Florentine song sheet is more didactically patriotic, imagining Bassi thinking of himself as an example for young patriots and longing to see a liberated Italy.

The earliest possible point of origin for the song is pinpointed by its melody, drawn from Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (1851) – specifically from the narrative ‘Tutte le feste al tempio’, sung near the centre of the second act, just after Gilda has been abducted and raped by

³ ‘La morte del padre Ugo Bassi frate di Garibaldi fucilato dagli austriaci in Bologna il 15 giugno 1849’ (Firenze, 1873); cited on ildeposito.org and reproduced in Emilio Jona, *Canzonette che fecero l’Italia* (Milan, 1962).

⁴ Lucy Riall has traced the parallel tracks of Roman Catholic histories of martyrs and the cult of martyrdom promoted by the Risorgimento, arguing that the celebration of the martyr both offered symbolic figures around which to rally a sense of ‘collective belonging’ and achieved the transformation of military failure into symbols of ‘an Italian valor that transcended death, defeat, and political decline’. See her ‘Martyr Cults in Nineteenth-Century Italy’, *Journal of Modern History* 82 (2010), 255–87. Riall shows that the martyr cult was solidified even before Bassi’s death, by the publication of Atto Vannucci’s 1848 book *I martiri della libertà italiana*, which was reprinted seven times between 1849 and 1887, and remained in print throughout the nineteenth century (269).

the Duke of Mantua. In ‘Tutte le feste’, she sets out to explain to Rigoletto events that have led up to this moment; but her naïve infatuation and sentimental credulity prevent her from remembering anything beyond the tender moments of her first encounters with the duke in church, their first glances, their words of love. If in narrative terms the tale seems to be pure evasion, there are grounds for hearing Gilda’s resolutely syllabic music here as something more – perhaps signalling a passage into a greater clarity and maturity, the moment when she leaves behind (as Elizabeth Hudson has put it) ‘the crinoline trills and furbelows of Act I’.⁵

We can only speculate about why *this* melody from Verdi was adapted as Ugo Bassi’s dying lament (and it seems to be one of only a few instances in which Verdi’s tunes were retooled for popular, patriotic ends). Equally, there seems to be no way of knowing how quickly Gilda’s utterance was taken up as a patriotic song; but certain aspects of the style hint at an origin soon after *Rigoletto*’s successful premiere in Venice in 1851. The gentle, lamentational style is typical of patriotic songs of the earlier phases of the Risorgimento; once Garibaldi began to amass his army of volunteers and move south in 1859, these gentle, almost secretive laments and elegies were supplanted by more pugnacious songs narrating battles or inciting soldiers to fight.

Contrafacts often seem to be prompted by a single, often rather trivial, point of resemblance: could it be that the devotional setting in which Gilda first met the duke was enough, along with her narrative’s elegiac mood, to suggest a connection with the martyred cleric? It is tempting to go further, to hear the descending intervals that end each of Gilda’s short-breathed phrases as voicing the resignation and grief of the condemned priest, or even to imagine that the disjunctive style of Gilda’s melody, broken by frequent pauses as if for breath, might prompt even listeners who did not recognise the source melody to discern something of the tenuous subjectivity of Verdi’s heroine in the words of the martyred Bassi. Yet possibly the most interesting feature of this textual overlay comes just at the point where the two versions diverge most. In each of its first two strophes, Gilda’s narrative modulates to the submediant major, as Gilda sings of the glances and words of love that passed between the couple. The Bassi lament eschews this major-key turn altogether, substituting an almost keening, incantational refrain (‘Il mio *sangue* è *innocente*’) in place of Gilda’s fleeting moment of light and hope.

More could be said about this melody and its recorded performance, but such observations about melodic and tonal details are surely beside the point. It is much more likely that blunter forces were at work in turning Verdi’s ‘Tutte le feste’ into Ugo Bassi’s dying lament. The prestige of opera – and of this recently successful opera in particular – would have been an important factor. As in the well-known case of the chorus from *Ernani* that was repurposed in 1846 to honour the new pope Pio IX, occasions of protest or activism can gain intensity through the invocation of the ‘operatic’ register.⁶ Beyond and below opera’s undeniable cultural capital may lie an

⁵ Elizabeth Hudson, ‘Gilda Seduced’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4 (1992), 244.

⁶ The occasions on which the *Ernani* chorus was used for political purposes are listed and discussed in Peter Stamatov, ‘Interpretive Activism and the Political Uses of Verdi’s Operas in the 1840s’, *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002), 345–66. The simplest alteration to the sung text

footnote continued on next page

affective rationale for the borrowing. To borrow the terminology of affect theory, the melodies of both Gilda's song and the *Ermani* chorus afford a certain kind of experience for listeners, one of heightened engagement and empathy that in turn might condition listeners from disparate regions and walks of life to care about fictional representations and, by extension, to engage with a common cause.

Bassi's lament shares something of the passive, elegiac mood that Roger Parker has perceived in 'Va pensiero'; by the 1860s and 1870s, when it was taken up as an official symbol of Italian Unification, the *Nabucco* chorus functioned as a vehicle for nostalgia, an evocation not of a lost homeland, but of lost times.⁷ But the Bassi lament earns its status as 'political' opera in rather different ways – not through an imagined, retrospective connection between different types of bondage and colonial oppression mobilised over several decades by politicians and scholars, but through an apparently casual appropriation, in which a discourse of political martyrdom is superimposed on a narrative that thinly conceals a tale of sexual violence and innocence betrayed. Again unlike 'Va pensiero' and the clutch of other operatic tunes that gained a shaky footing as political symbols in the nineteenth century, the lament of Ugo Bassi communicates most powerfully through elements that do not appear on the page of Verdi's score and could never have been uttered at La Fenice or in any other opera house where Gilda rehearsed her tale. If we can draw any conclusions from that recording made in the Po Valley in the 1960s, it may be that Verdi's music gained its political force partly through the accretions of melisma, portamento and timbral embellishment improvised in performance by singers remote from the high-art legacy of Neapolitan melody and the cultivation of the smooth *passaggio*. In other words, it is partly the distance of this remade song from Verdi's model that makes it worth remembering and replaying, granting it a presence that might be described as 'devoid of master plot, anti-historical, but nonetheless there'.⁸

MARY ANN SMART is Gladyce Arata Terrill Professor in the Department of Music at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (California, 2004) and *Waiting for Verdi: Opera and Political Opinion in Italy, 1815–1848* (California, forthcoming).

involved substituting the name 'Pio' for 'Carlo' (the sixteenth-century Spanish king in *Ermani*), as in 'O sommo Pio' and (later in the same chorus) 'a Pio Nono onore'.

⁷ Roger Parker, *Leonora's Last Act* (Princeton, 1997), 39.

⁸ Roger Parker, *Remaking the Song* (Berkeley, 2006), 27.