

Verdi at the Heart of the Dictatorship

A celebrazione verdiana Among Fascists

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Abstract: This chapter examines the political appropriation of Giuseppe Verdi in Fascist Italy through a study of the celebrations commemorating the fortieth anniversary of his death in 1941. More specifically, it provides an analysis of the Verdi Year through the lens of a landmark event held among fascist officials at the Academy of Italy in Rome, the heart of the regime's intellectual power, in June 1940—a few days before Italy's entry to war. By reconstructing the structure and the reception of the event, I shed light on how Mussolini's regime maintained its grip on the commemorations and disseminated a discourse entirely consistent with the fascist political and ideological agenda. By insisting on Verdi's patriotic image, exploiting the nationalist topoi conveyed in his operas, emphasizing his peasant origins, and exalting his Italianness, party intellectuals nurtured a Verdian myth that enhanced the Fascist political and totalitarian project.

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The fortieth anniversary of Giuseppe Verdi's death in 1941 impregnated the fascist musical calendar with a series of commemorative events throughout the peninsula. From mid-1940 to the end of 1941, speeches, official ceremonies, exhibitions, opera productions and concert series succeeded one another in which a great number of Italian intellectuals, artists and politicians among the most influential took part. The Verdi Year (*Anno verdiano*) proved to be a significant display of cultural propaganda with more than a hundred events held both in Italy and abroad, and which responded to the Duce's own will to celebrate a figure carefully molded on the fascist political and totalitarian project.

Such a pronounced infatuation stemmed from the ideal figure that Verdi represented. As the “bard of the Risorgimento,” he embodied both the expression of Italian patriotism and cultural primacy, in addition to his undisputed popularity as one of the most frequently performed composers throughout the *ventennio* (1922–1943).¹ Fascist authorities therefore took advantage of the composer’s prominence and exploited his anniversary as a powerful tool to support the legitimacy of their political power, at a pivotal moment when the regime was engaging Italy in a conflict alongside Nazi Germany. The end of Italy’s non-belligerency formalized by Mussolini on June 10, 1940—a few days after the first major Verdi event in Rome—was indeed greeted by the Italians without enthusiasm and mobilized a nation whose military capacity was fundamentally weak, by no means in accordance with the Duce’s ambitious expansionist aims.² Erected as a quintessential icon of Italian cultural superiority, Verdi served as an ideal pretext to praise the glorious past of the peninsula, set connections with contemporary Italian life, and testify to the greatness of a nation that intended to go on a crusade against “Western plutocracies” and establish its domination over the Mediterranean basin. Celebrating Verdi thus enabled the fascist government to reassert its ideological orientation through the dissemination of a figure in line with the ideals of the regime.

This phenomenon has only been briefly addressed; although some studies have dealt with the musical *ventennio*,³ few of them were devoted to the instrumentalization of Verdi under Mussolini’s regime, and even fewer to the political implications of the 1941 anniversary. Various publications have touched on the 1941 commemorations, but only briefly, focusing instead on the media,⁴

1 Fiamma Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti nel ventennio fascista* (Florence: Discanto, 1984), 25.

2 Philippe Foro, *L'Italie fasciste* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006), 175–77.

3 See for instance Stefano Biguzzi, *L'orchestra del Duce: Mussolini, la musica e il mito del capo* (Turin: Utet, 2004); Charlotte Ginot-Slacik and Michela Niccolai, *Musiques dans l'Italie fasciste: 1922–1945* (Paris: Fayard, 2019); Roberto Illiano, ed., *Italian Music During the Fascist Period* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004); Stephanie Klauk, Luca Aversano, and Rainer Kleinertz, eds., *Musik und Musikwissenschaft im Umfeld des Faschismus: Deutsch-italienische Perspektiven* (Sinzig: Studio Verlag, 2015); Fiamma Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti nel ventennio fascista* (Florence: Discanto, 1984); Harvey Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy* (New York: Norton, 1987); Jürg Stenzl, “Fascismo—kein Thema?,” in *Musikforschung Faschismus Nationalsozialismus: Referate der Tagung Schloss Engers* (8. bis 11. März 2000), ed. Isolde von Foerster et al. (Mainz: Are Verlag, 2001), 143–50; Jürg Stenzl, *Von Giacomo Puccini zu Luigi Nono: Italienische Musik 1922–1952: Faschismus, Resistenza, Republik* (Büren: Knuf, 1990).

4 See Marco Capra, *Verdi in prima pagina: Nascita, sviluppo e affermazione della figura di Verdi nella stampa italiana dal XIX al XXI secolo* (Lucca: Libreria

on regional celebrations,⁵ or on the topoi conveyed during the *Anno verdiano* and their echoes after the war.⁶ This chapter proposes to deepen the reflection through a different and complementary approach, more specifically by studying the festivities through the lens of the inauguration of an exhibition of memorabilia (*mostra verdiana*) at the Academy of Italy in Rome in June 1940 in the presence of the Duce, as a landmark event of the Verdi anniversary. By reconstructing the structure of this event and analyzing its reception in the Italian media landscape of the time, I intend to shed light on how the fascist regime got involved in the organization of a highly politicized cultural event that exemplified the means used throughout the *Anno verdiano* to maintain political and ideological control over the commemorations.

This close focus also allows the identification of the discursive dominant themes that have been emblematic of those conveyed throughout 1941 and the strategies that served to disseminate a discourse entirely consistent with the fascist political agenda, at a time when the dictatorship became even more repressive, both culturally and socially—a tightening that occurred in the 1930s and intensified through its alignment on Nazi Germany.⁷ This approach seeks

musicale italiana, 2014); Claudia Polo, *Immaginari verdiani: Opera, media e industria culturale nell'Italia del XX secolo* (Milan: Ricordi, 2004).

- 5 For the commemorations held at the Academy of Italy in Rome, see Paola Cagiano and Susanna Panetta, “Giuseppe Verdi e l’Accademia dei Lincei: Percorsi e vicende,” in *Verdi e Roma*, ed. Olga Jesurum (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 2015), 429–56. For a survey of the Verdi anniversary in Parma, see Marco Capra, “Tra modernismo e restaurazione: La vita musicale a Parma nel ventennio fascista,” *Storia di ieri: Parma dal regime fascista alla liberazione (1927–1945)* (Parma: Istituzione biblioteche del comune di Parma, 2011), <https://www.comune.parma.it/dizionarioparmigiani/ita/La%20vita%20musical.e.aspx?idMostra=49&idNode=380>. For the reception of the Verdi Year beyond the Alps, see Gundula Kreuzer, *Verdi and the Germans: From Unification to the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), particularly 229–36; and Fiamma Nicolodi, “Mitografia verdiana nel primo Novecento,” in *Verdi Reception*, ed. Lorenzo Frassà and Michela Niccolai (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 70.
- 6 See Nicolodi, “Mitografia verdiana,” 58–75; Birgit Pauls, *Giuseppe Verdi und das Risorgimento: Ein politischer Mythos im Prozess der Nationenbildung* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), in particular the chapter “Der politische Mythos Verdi im faschistischen Schulbuch und bei Mussolini,” 305–10. For echoes of the 1941 anniversary in post-war Italy, see Harriet Boyd-Bennett, *Opera in Postwar Venice: Cultural Politics and the Avantgarde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). See the second chapter “A Futura Memoria: Verdi’s Attila, 1951”: 61–90, and more specifically 64, 74–75.
- 7 See Fiamma Nicolodi, “Aspetti di politica culturale nel ventennio fascista,” in *Italian Music During the Fascist Period*, ed. Roberto Illiano (Turnhout: Brepols,

to examine this circumscribed event as a microcosm that exemplifies the mechanisms underlying the instrumentalization of musical heritage by authoritarian political forces through commemorations intended to integrate a creator into the dominant ideology. The analysis presented in this chapter draws from a wide range of journalistic and archival sources, including newspapers, cultural periodicals, commemorative books published in the wake of the festivities, and archival material (especially the documents gathered at the Archivio dell'Accademia nazionale dei Lincei in Rome).⁸

Ultimately, this study aims to question the role of political, but also intellectual and artistic figures in the development of a narrative that supported the political power, while illustrating how a public discourse of commemoration could be used to promote and disseminate an ideology based on ultranationalism, hegemony, and oppression. The *Anno verdiano* of 1941 therefore serves as an example of anti-democracy: it allows us to examine the mechanisms by which the political power—in this case, not a shared and balanced power, but a centralized and absolute one—succeeded in keeping its sway over the cultural heritage.

The Verdi Year, “Per la volontà del Duce”

The *Anno verdiano* was not the only anniversary that occurred under the fascist regime, far from it. Essential to the dictatorship,¹⁰ commemorations were abundant during the *ventennio* and served to create experiences of collectivity aimed at nurturing the process of cultural and national cohesion and increasing adherence to the Duce's political project. Remembering was also an integral part of the regime's strategy to celebrate the national heritage, provide an official and ideologically convenient interpretation of the past, and legitimize the

2004), 97; and Emilio Gentile, *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme? Histoire et interprétation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 56–59.

- 8 The collection *Ufficio tecnico* has been essential for documenting the Verdi exhibition organized in June 1940 at the Academy of Italy in Rome. See Archivio Accademia d'Italia, *Ufficio tecnico*, b. 11, fasc. 58.
- 9 “Per il genio e la volontà del Duce.” “Il Duce inaugura all'Accademia d'Italia la mostra di autografi e cimeli verdiani,” *Gazzetta di Venezia*, June 5, 1940, 5; “Per la volontà e con la personale partecipazione del Duce.” Alceo Toni, “Mussolini inaugura all'Accademia d'Italia la Mostra dei cimeli verdiani,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, June 5, 1940, 4.
- 10 Mabel Berezin, “The Festival State: Celebration and Commemoration in Fascist Italy,” *Journal of Modern European History* 4, no. 1 “Dictatorship and Festivals” (2006), 71–72.

authority of the official power. As a “festival state,”¹¹ fascist Italy was the scene of an intense commemorative activity; Italian cultural life was punctuated by several tributes paid to the patriarchs of the peninsula, all of them transformed into national heroes. In this regard, the fiftieth anniversary of Garibaldi’s death in 1932 reached a high point, on the occasion of which a “commemorative spectacle”¹² largely orchestrated by the Duce unfolded and contributed to the institutionalization of a fascist historic imaginary.¹³ Several other figures of the past were at the heart of commemorative attention, such as Mantegna in 1931, Bellini and Horace in 1935, Giotto and Leopardi in 1937, Galileo, Livy, and Rossini in 1942, and Monteverdi in 1943. The Verdi anniversary of 1941 therefore took place in this mosaic of commemorative events and proved to be a highlight of Italy’s musical life in wartime. Celebrated in great style, the *Anno verdiano* stemmed from the Duce’s personal will and unfolded over more than a year, turning out to be the peak of the political appropriation of the composer under fascism.

Mussolini’s intention of celebrating Verdi was shared through a communiqué from the General Directorate for the Theatre (*Direzione generale per il teatro*)—under the aegis of the Ministry of Popular Culture (*Ministero della cultura popolare*)¹⁴—addressed to the opera houses on August 20, 1940, decreeing the programming of a Verdi opera on January 27, 1941, the anniversary of the composer’s death, in order to “solemnly” remember the “great Maestro.”¹⁵ This intention was then published in the press; the communiqué’s content was

11 See Berezin, “The Festival State”: 60–74.

12 Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003: 74.

13 For an in-depth analysis of the *cinquantenario garibaldino*, see Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary*, mainly chapters 3 to 5.

14 The Theater Inspectorate (*Ispettorato del teatro*), which later became the Directorate for the Theatre, was founded in 1935 with the aim of creating a centralized structure to coordinate and control cultural activities. The Inspectorate operated under the Ministry of Press and Propaganda (*Ministero per la stampa e la propaganda*), which in 1937 became the Ministry of Popular Culture. See Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti nel ventennio fascista*, 17.

15 “Il Duce ha espresso il desiderio che la figura e le opere di Giuseppe Verdi siano messe maggiormente in luce nella vita musicale italiana. Poiché il 27 gennaio p.v. si compiono 40 anni dalla morte del grande Maestro, si dispone che tutti gli enti che a quella data hanno in corso la normale stagione commemorino solennemente l’anniversario con l’esecuzione in tal giorno di un’opera verdiana.” Circolare della Direzione generale per il teatro (Ministero della cultura popolare, Div. II, Sez. I, prot. 16519), 20 agosto 1940 agli enti autonomi dei teatri lirici. Cited in Nicolodi, “Mitografia verdiana,” 69. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise specified.

essentially reproduced, to which information regarding the program was added: the forthcoming commemorative cycle organized by the Ministry of Popular Culture at the Teatro Reale dell'Opera in Rome was publicized, during which Verdi's operas of "popular character" were to be presented. The announcement appeared in Italy's leading newspapers, including *Corriere della Sera* (Milan), *Il Popolo d'Italia* (Rome), *La Stampa* (Turin), in regional newspapers (as *Gazzetta di Venezia*, Venice), and in music periodicals such as *Il Musicista* (published by the National Fascist Union of Musicians in Rome), *Musica d'oggi* (Milan), and *La Rassegna musicale* (Rome):

The Duce has ordered that the great figure and the work of Giuseppe Verdi be worthily commemorated and celebrated on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the death of the Maestro, which will take place on January 27 of the year XIX.¹⁶

The Ministry of Popular Culture has therefore elaborated a series of special commemorative events that will begin next October in Rome at the Teatro Reale, before the usual winter opera season, where there will be some representations of Verdi's popular works. *I Vespri siciliani*, *La Forza del destino*, *Il Trovatore*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff* will be represented (in daytime and at affordable prices); conductors will be Serafin, De Fabritiis and Bellezza. Then, a solemn Verdian celebration will take place in most Italian opera houses, including self-governing theaters (*enti autonomi*),¹⁷ on the evening of January 27. Theaters that usually start their season after that date will host a celebration during their performances.

Even the most important Italian concert societies, headed by the Institution of the concerts of the Reale Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, and that of the Teatro Vittorio Emanuele II in Florence, will celebrate Verdi with a great vocal-symphonic concert.

Ultimately, conferences illustrating the life and work of the great Maestro

16 In 1925, Mussolini decreed the "fascist era" and established a Fascist calendar, which he began in October 1922, on the day after the March on Rome. All official documents had to be dated in such a way as to add the fascist year in Roman numerals following the year of the Gregorian calendar. In the above case, January 27, 1941, belonged to the nineteenth year of the fascist era, hence the number XIX.

17 *Enti autonomi* were state-subsidized theaters. Previously managed by impresarios, theaters started to be run as *enti autonomi* in the 1920s, beginning with the Teatro alla Scala (1920), followed by the Teatro Reale dell'Opera in Rome (1929) and all major theaters of the peninsula (Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Naples, Palermo, Turin, Trieste, Venice, and Verona). This standardization responded to the fascists' will to exercise a more effective political control while maintaining an artistic quality "worthy of the Italian tradition." See Fiamma Nicolodi, "Il sistema produttivo dall'Unità a oggi," in *Storia dell'opera italiana*, ed. Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli (Turin: Edizioni di Torino, 1987), 4:194–201.

will be held in the most important cities of Italy; the same will be done abroad in Cultural Institutes and at the Dante Alighieri Society.¹⁸

Following the press release, many state-subsidized theaters (*enti lirici*) engaged in celebrating Verdi with great fanfare: the Teatro Reale dell'Opera in Rome held two cycles dedicated to the composer in the fall of 1940 and 1941, in addition to two commemorative concerts on January 29 and 31, 1941; because of the composer's Parmesan origin, the Teatro Regio in Parma organized a Verdi season (*stagione verdiana*) and hosted an exhibition of memorabilia from January 27 to February 25, 1941; *Falstaff* and *La Traviata* were staged at the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa and at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, respectively, on January 27, 1941; the Teatro alla Scala presented a concert on January 30 and February 2, 1941; the Teatro La Fenice organized in collaboration with the Fascist Union of Musicians of Venice a commemorative concert on February 2, 1941; the Teatro comunale in Florence presented a ceremony (*celebrazione*

18 "Il Duce ha disposto che la grande figura e l'opera di Giuseppe Verdi siano degnamente rievocate e celebrate in occasione del 40° anniversario della morte del Maestro, che cade il 27 gennaio dell'anno XIX.

Il Ministero della Cultura popolare ha pertanto predisposto un ciclo di speciali manifestazioni celebrative che avrà inizio nel prossimo ottobre in Roma, dove, al Teatro Reale, prima della consueta stagione lirica invernale, avranno luogo alcune rappresentazioni di opere verdiane a carattere popolare. Si rappresenteranno (in recite diurne ed a prezzi popolari) *I Vespri siciliani*, *La Forza del destino*, *Il Trovatore*, *Otello* e *Falstaff*; direttori i maestri Serafin, De Fabritiis e Bellezza.

La sera del 27 gennaio poi, nel maggior numero dei teatri lirici italiani, compresi quelli degli Enti autonomi, avrà luogo la solenne celebrazione verdiana. Quei teatri che iniziano di consueto la loro stagione dopo tale data, terranno invece la celebrazione durante il corso dei loro spettacoli.

Anche le più importanti società italiane di concerti, con a capo l'Istituzione dei concerti della R. Accademia di S. Cecilia, di Roma, e quella dell'Ente autonomo del Teatro Vittorio Emanuele II di Firenze, celebreranno Verdi con un grande concerto sinfonico vocale.

Nelle più importanti città d'Italia saranno infine promosse conferenze illustranti la vita e l'opera del grande Maestro; analogamente si farà all'estero presso gli Istituti di cultura e le sezioni della 'Dante Alighieri.'" See "Notizie," *Musica d'oggi* 22, no. 8-9 (August-September 1940): 254. The text has been slightly modified to be published in several newspapers of the peninsula, such as *La Stampa* ("Il 40° anniversario della morte di Giuseppe Verdi," *La Stampa*, August 23, 1940, 3); *Corriere della sera* ("Il 40° della morte di Verdi: Un ciclo di manifestazioni celebrative," *Corriere della sera*, August 23, 1940, 4); *Gazzetta di Venezia* ("Il Duce per la celebrazione di Verdi," *Gazzetta di Venezia*, August 23, 1940, 3); *Il Musicista* ("Celebrazioni verdiane," *Il Musicista* 7, no. 11 (August 1940): 168); and *La Rassegna musicale* ("Notizie e informazioni," *La Rassegna musicale* 13, no. 7-8 (July-August 1940): 325).

verdiana) “under the auspices of the Ministry of Popular Culture”¹⁹ on January 24, 1941, during which the orchestra and choir of the Maggio musicale fiorentino performed the *Messa da Requiem*.

The *Requiem* was also at the heart of a large-scale concert under the direction of high-profile conductor Victor De Sabata at the Basilica Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome on December 14, 1940. The event brought together 150 performers from the Rome and Turin Radio Orchestras, a choir of 250 singers and eminent soloists: Maria Caniglia, Ebe Stignani, Beniamino Gigli, and Tancredi Pasero. Reportedly, more than four thousand people attended the ceremony, including several personalities from the music and political scene, such as the Minister of Popular Culture Alessandro Pavolini and the German ambassador Hans Georg von Mackensen—who earlier that day inaugurated the new headquarters of the Italian-German Association in Rome in the presence of fascist and Nazi officials. As a highlight of the Verdi Year, the *Requiem* in Santa Maria degli Angeli was broadcast on national radio (*Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche*, E.I.A.R.) and was preceded by a commemorative speech delivered on air by the fascist official Roberto Farinacci.

This event testified to Rome’s significance throughout the *Anno verdiano*, both in terms of the number and the prominence of the celebrations; the capital hosted several ceremonies, both popular and official, which served to illustrate the Eternal City’s dynamism and nurture the myth of *romanità*.²⁰ The Duce indeed aimed to restore Rome’s status as an imperial capital and transform the city as a showcase for the fascist state, the ultimate symbol of Mussolini’s regime.²¹ It was also in Rome that the first major Verdi event was launched, the political significance of which set the tone for subsequent festivities.

19 “Celebrazione verdiana, sotto gli auspici del Ministero della Coltura popolare.” Aloma Bardi and Mauro Conti, eds., *Teatro comunale di Firenze: Catalogo delle manifestazioni 1928–1997* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1998), 80.

20 The cult of *romanità*—romanness—aimed at celebrating the ancient Roman past as a common heritage and arose from Mussolini’s will to restore the former glory of the Romans in Italy. See Andrea Giardina, “The Fascist Myth of Romanity,” *Estudos Avançados* 22, no. 62 (2008): 55–76.

21 John Agnew, “‘Ghosts of Rome’: The Haunting of Fascist Efforts at Remaking Rome as Italy’s Capital City,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 28 (2010), 179; Maria Rosa Chiapparò, “Le mythe de la ‘Terza Roma’ ou l’immense théâtre de la Rome fasciste,” *Nuovo rinascimento* (May 17, 2004), 20, 22–23, <http://www.nuovorinascentimento.org/n-rinasc/saggi/pdf/chiapparò/roma.pdf>.

The Anno verdiano's Prologue: *La Mostra verdiana*

Precisely six days before Mussolini declared war on England and France from his balcony on the Palazzo Venezia, a handful of fascist intellectuals welcomed the Duce and his disciples on June 4, 1940, to inaugurate the *mostra verdiana*, an exhibition of memorabilia set up at the Villa Farnesina, seat of the Academy of Italy. As the “regime’s highest cultural institution,”²² the Academy was founded by Mussolini in 1929 “in order to preserve the national purity of Italian culture”²³ and whose objective was to subject the Italian intelligentsia to political power.²⁴

The event arose from a donation of 365 letters written between 1859 and 1890 by Verdi to Senator Giuseppe Piroli (1815–1890) offered by Piroli’s heirs to the Duce, who then granted them to the institution in 1940. The *mostra*’s elaboration was entrusted to the Verdian scholar Alessandro Luzio, historian and academician, who was in the process of editing Verdi’s correspondence. Luzio conceived the exhibition in order to highlight the material recently acquired by the Academy (section entitled *Carteggi*), which also served to advertise the first two volumes of Verdi’s *Carteggi* he previously edited.²⁵ The selection of the documents and their configuration announced various topoi that were to be exploited throughout the *Anno verdiano*, notably by themes devoted to the composer’s political involvement (subsections entitled “Verdi’s politics”; “Verdi deputy and senator”), his peasant identity (“Rural Verdi”), and his humanness (“Verdi philanthropist”).²⁶ In addition, the exhibition included scores, manuscripts, and several depictions of the composer.²⁷

Luzio was also a key figure at the *mostra*’s opening on June 4, 1940, having delivered an inaugural speech whose content revolved around Mussolini’s re-

22 “Massima istituzione culturale del Regime.” “Il Duce inaugura all’Accademia d’Italia la mostra di autografi e cimeli verdiani,” *Gazzetta di Venezia*, June 5, 1940, 5.

23 “Allo scopo di conservare la purezza nazionale della cultura italiana.” Nicolodi, “Mitografia verdiana,” 61.

24 For an extensive study on the Academy of Italy, see Marinella Ferrarotto, *L’Accademia d’Italia: Intellettuali e potere durante il fascismo* (Naples: Liguori, 1977).

25 The publication was interrupted by the war; the last two volumes of Luzio’s edition were published posthumously in 1947. See Alessandro Luzio, ed., *Carteggi verdiani* (Rome: Reale Accademia d’Italia/Accademia dei Lincei, 1935–1947).

26 “La politica di Verdi”; “Verdi deputato e senatore”; “Verdi rurale”; and “Verdi benefattore.” See Cagiano and Panetta, “Giuseppe Verdi e l’Accademia dei Lincei,” 443.

27 “Mostra verdiana,” *Archivio Accademia d’Italia, Ufficio tecnico*, b. 11, fasc. 58.

cent donation.²⁸ After personally thanking the Duce for having “offered the most splendid testimony of his [Verdi’s] aesthetic, moral and political importance,”²⁹ the academician pointed out the guiding threads of the correspondence between Verdi and Piroli, in order to portray a composer particularly well suited to his audience: an intrinsically Italian musician of “humble origins”³⁰ who “praised his peasant roots,”³¹ a patriot who served his country both as an artist and as a deputy, and who vehemently shared his dissatisfaction with the government, outraged at the “inability of the rulers”³² to adequately protect culture and agriculture.

This polysemic depiction enabled a reinterpretation of Verdi’s persona in light of the *ventennio* and the forging of teleological links between fascist policies and the composer’s convictions. By stressing the idea that the Duce was the head of state foreseen by Verdi to stimulate Italy’s artistic and socio-economic life, Luzio suggested that the composer had anticipated, and even wished for, the fascist takeover. Luzio’s assertions, however, must be nuanced; as musicologist Fiamma Nicolodi pointed out, Verdi expressed the need for a bigger involvement of the state, notably in the music scene, but he never considered the control of opera houses as was exercised by the fascist regime.³³

28 Luzio’s speech was published by the Academy of Italy in the collection “*celebrazioni verdiane*,” which brought together several speeches given by Academicians throughout the Verdi anniversary. The series included Arturo Farinelli, *Giuseppe Verdi e il suo mondo interiore: Discorso per il quarantennio della morte tenuto alla Reale Accademia d’Italia il 19 febbraio 1941–XIX* (Rome: Reale Accademia d’Italia, 1941); Angelo Gatti, *L’italianità di Giuseppe Verdi: Discorso per il quarantennio della morte tenuto nella Casa di riposo dei musicisti in Milano il 27 gennaio 1941–XIX* (Rome: Reale Accademia d’Italia, 1941); Alessandro Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi: Discorso inaugurale della mostra verdiana alla presenza del Duce nella sede della Reale Accademia d’Italia, 4 giugno 1940–XVIII* (Rome: Reale Accademia d’Italia, 1940); and Francesco Orestano, *Giuseppe Verdi mediterraneo e universale: Discorso per la settimana verdiana di Monaco di Baviera pronunciato il 5 febbraio 1941–XIX nella Münchner Künstlerhaus* (Rome: Reale Accademia d’Italia, 1941).

29 “Nè poteva giungere sotto auspici più fausti, quando Voi, Duce, [...] offrite la testimonianza più splendida della sua importanza estetica, morale, politica.” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 6.

30 “Umili origini.” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 5.

31 “Si gloriava della sua origine contadinesca.” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 11.

32 “Incapacità dei governanti.” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 11.

33 Nicolodi, “Mitografia verdiana,” 52, fn. 55.



Figure 1: Alessandro Luzio (right) delivering the opening address of the *mostra verdiana* alongside the president of the Academy of Italy Luigi Federzoni (on his right) in the presence of the Duce (left) and fascist intellectuals. Source: Alessandro Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 22-23. Courtesy of the Archivio dell'Accademia nazionale dei Lincei.



Figure 2: Guests, led by the president of the Academy of Italy Luigi Federzoni (right) alongside Mussolini (center), moving towards the concert in the gardens of the Villa Farnesina. Source: see Figure 1.

Listened to by the Duce with “keen interest,”³⁴ Luzio’s speech ended on a nationalist tone, declaring that the ceremony was an “omen of power, of glory to which the renewed nation yearned.”³⁵ The guests then viewed the exhibition and attended a brief concert in the gardens of the Villa Farnesina with the orchestra of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia under the baton of conductor Bernardino Molinari—a fundamental figure in Roman musical life whose enthusiasm for fascism was well known.



Figure 3: Guests (including the Duce, in the front row) attending the concert performed by the orchestra of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in the gardens of the Villa Farnesina. Source: see Figure 1.

The concert included symphonic excerpts from Verdi’s operas: an unpublished *sinfonia* from *Aida*, the prelude of *La Traviata*’s last act, and the *sinfonia* from *I Vespri siciliani*. The repertoire was emblematic of the *Anno verdiano*’s musical choices, consisting of works belonging to Verdi’s stylistic maturity that were well known and appreciated by the public. *Aida* was particularly well suited to a Roman audience, being the most performed opera at Rome’s Teatro

34 “*Vivissimo interesse.*” “Il Duce inaugura la Mostra dei cimeli verdiani,” *Corriere della Sera*, June 5, 1940, 3. Also in other newspapers, such as “Il Duce inaugura all’Accademia la mostra dei cimeli Verdiani,” *La Stampa*, June 5, 1940, 4; and “Il Duce inaugura all’Accademia d’Italia la mostra di autografi e cimeli verdiani,” *Gazzetta di Venezia*, June 5, 1940, 5.

35 “*Auspicio di potenza, di gloria, a cui ha diretto la rinnovellata nazione.*” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 7.

Costanzi (which became the Teatro Reale dell'Opera in 1928) from 1900 to 1950.³⁶ Its then unpublished *sinfonia*³⁷ had been composed for the Italian premiere on February 8, 1872, at the Teatro alla Scala with an intention to replace the opera's prelude as premiered in Cairo on December 24, 1871. Having decided to keep the original prelude, however, Verdi withdrew the *sinfonia* in Sant'Agata, a decision that kept the score in obscurity.³⁸ We owe its rediscovery to Toscanini, who transcribed the music in 1913 from the original manuscript and premiered the *sinfonia* with the NBC Symphony Orchestra on March 30, 1940. Then deeply hostile to Mussolini's regime and exiled in the United States, Toscanini most likely had the aim of reducing the significance of the concert at the Academy as a national premiere.³⁹ The incident was touched upon in the press by Alceo Toni, who condemned in *Il Popolo d'Italia* the "questionable indiscretion of a great conductor"⁴⁰ for having brought the work in the United States.

Of great popularity, *La Traviata* was among the operas most often performed during the *Anno verdiano*. Announcing Violetta's resignation in the face of her inevitable death, the prelude to the last act served to illustrate Verdi's sensitivity and the powerful musical narrativity of his operas, notions that permeated the celebrative rhetoric of 1941. *I Vespri siciliani* also received considerable attention throughout the anniversary, especially in Rome; in addition to the *sinfonia* presented at the Academy, the opera opened the *ciclo verdiano* organized by the Ministry of Popular Culture at the Teatro Reale dell'Opera in October 1940, a series of operas bringing together works of "popular character," as seen above. At the Academy, *I Vespri*'s *sinfonia* had replaced the overture to *La Forza del destino* originally programmed for the concert,⁴¹ which was probably considered too tormented to conclude the ceremony. *I Vespri* must have been appealing for its military nature (exemplified in the *sinfonia* with an omnipresent snare drum) and for its plot, which progresses towards the

36 Nicolodi has shown that the ten operas most frequently performed at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome from 1900 to 1950 were *Aida*, *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Mefistofele*, *Carmen*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, and *Cavalleria rusticana*. See Fiamma Nicolodi, "Musica a Roma nella prima metà del '900," *Analecta musicologica* 45 (2011), 494.

37 Pianist and musicologist Pietro Spada edited the *sinfonia* in 1977 (Milan, Suvini & Zerboni). See Antonio Rostagno, "Overture e dramma negli anni Settanta: Il caso della Sinfonia di Aida," *Studi verdiani* 14 (1999): 22.

38 Rostagno, "Overture e dramma negli anni Settanta," 20–21.

39 Rostagno, "Overture e dramma negli anni Settanta," 21–22; Cagiano and Panetta, "Giuseppe Verdi e l'Accademia dei Lincei," 446–50.

40 "Discutibile indiscrezione di un grande direttore d'orchestra." Alceo Toni, "Mussolini inaugura all'Accademia d'Italia la Mostra dei cimeli verdiani," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, June 5, 1940, 4.

41 Cagiano and Panetta, "Giuseppe Verdi e l'Accademia dei Lincei," 446.



Figure 4: Orchestra of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia under the baton of conductor Bernardino Molinari. Source: see Figure 1.

massacre of French troops by Sicilian patriots (which is already announced in the overture by the thematic choice). A few days before Italy's invasion of France, the parallelism was explicit, although not exploited by the press.

After the concert, the ceremony concluded with the departure of the Duce and his disciples to the musical background of *Giovinetta*, the official fascist anthem. The event, which unfolded in about an hour, was methodically planned; the archives at the Academy indicate, among other things, that the time allotted to Luzzo's speech was greater than the duration of the concert⁴²— a configuration that testified to the primacy of words rather than sounds to share politically and ideologically charged ideas. Moreover, the structure of the ceremony was a common formula during the *Anno verdiano* (although the musical material was generally more extensive); the majority of the commemorative events took the form of concerts featuring excerpts from Verdi's operas, preceded by speeches delivered by members of Italian cultural and/or political life. This type of event had been included in the calendar of many opera houses and cultural institutions, as well as in conservatories and music schools throughout the peninsula, aiming at reaching and involving young musicians in the celebration. This strategy allowed the creation of a politicized discursive landscape into which Verdi's music was inserted, thus adding an additional semantic layer to the musical event.

42 Letter to the Cancelliere, May 15, 1940, Archivio Accademia d'Italia, Ufficio tecnico, b. 11, fasc. 58.

The event received considerable media coverage; reports were published the following day in leading newspapers of the time, such as *Corriere della sera*, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, and *La Stampa*, as well as in the newsreel series *Cinegiornale Luce* a week later. These covers appeared in media in which military news prevailed, at a time when the Duce and his party were preparing the nation for an imminent war. The exploits of the Wehrmacht abounded in all the newspapers of the peninsula, encouraging Italian participation; the headline “Mussolini’s war” appeared on the front page of the June 5, 1940, issue of *Il Popolo d'Italia*, while the *Corriere della sera* published an article entitled “The Axis mission for the future of Europe and the world” below the report of the ceremony at the Academy.⁴³ The *Cinegiornale Luce* of June 11, 1940, (when Italy was at war) was mostly dedicated to military strength; the segment covering the *mostra verdiana* was coupled with reports glorifying the crushing victories of the Reich and the military power of befriended nations (Japan, Hungary, and Romania).

Almost entirely identical, the press reviews seemed to have stemmed from a common source—which probably came from the General Directorate for the press (*Direzione generale per la stampa*), an organ of the Ministry of Popular Culture whose task was to control and synchronize media content—except for *Il Popolo d'Italia*, which also featured a review by music critic Alceo Toni. This phenomenon bears witness to the lack of diversity that arose from the discursive landscape of the *Anno verdiano*; the media apparatus, entirely controlled by the regime, conveyed a fundamentally homogeneous discourse. This was a reality inherent to the fascist totalitarian project, where the establishment of an authoritarian media system and the imposition of censorship standardized the communicative tools and gradually suppressed the freedom of speech.⁴⁴

Both written and audiovisual reports revolved around the Duce; by stressing his “generous” donation, the media presented a patron of the arts and a music lover, a genuine “enlightened despot.” This depiction perpetuated the image of *Mussolini musicista* (Mussolini musician) which had been disseminated throughout the *ventennio* and portrayed the ruler as an amateur violinist and music connoisseur.⁴⁵ In addition to nurturing the cult of a charismatic leader

43 “Guerra mussoliniana,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, June 5, 1940, 1; “La missione dell’Asse per l’avvenire dell’Europa e del mondo,” *Corriere della sera*, June 5, 1940, 3.

44 For comprehensive studies on censorship in the publishing industry under Mussolini’s regime, see for instance Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) and Nicola Tranfaglia, *La stampa del regime 1932–1943: Le veline del Minculpop per orientare l’informazione* (Milan: Bompiani, 2005).

45 The figure of a musician dictator was nurtured throughout the *ventennio*, an emblematic case of which being *Mussolini musicista*, published in 1927 in the collection “Mussolinia.” Written by musicologist Raffaello De Rensis, the booklet

(inherent to fascist politics and its totalitarian logic), presenting a statesman mindful of the culture conveyed the idea that fascism was not only violence and domination,⁴⁶ especially in the context of a stricter repression in the arts and at a time when the media landscape was largely dominated by military news. This strategy also served to convey the image of a Duce in complete control of Italy's governance, who, despite the political uncertainty, yet supported the arts.

The reviews also testified to the hermetic and formal nature of the event (visually represented by ritualistic gestures such as the Roman salute); it consisted of an official ceremony reserved for high-ranking members of the regime who paid tribute to one of their own. This elitism contradicted Mussolini's will to celebrate Verdi through commemorations geared towards the entire population, an intention that was echoed in numerous "popular" events, notably under the aegis of the *Opera nazionale dopolavoro* (National Afterwork Club), an organization created under the regime to coordinate workers' leisure time. One can see the ambiguity of the regime's populist trends; despite an apparent proximity to the people, fascism remained exclusive.

The diversity of the media outlets allowed the scope of the coverage to increase; while print media paid predominant attention to Luzio's speech, the newsreels focused on the exhibition and on the concert (with no reference to the discourse). The conciseness of the musical comment in the press was emblematic of the treatment of music during the *Anno verdiano*, whereas critical assessments were generally limited to a few laudatory remarks about the performance. Such an approach testifies to the paralysis of music criticism that occurred during the anniversary, be it for the celebrative context or the censorship that prevailed in the print media.

The extent of the media coverage testifies to the role given to the media apparatus to document the festivities throughout the *Anno verdiano*, with a clear predominance of the press. As Claudia Polo has shown, the radio was significantly less exploited to disseminate Verdi-related content due to the war effort⁴⁷—which probably also explains the scarcity of the composer's ap-

aimed to extol the musical qualities of the Duce in order to portray him as a sensitive music lover and a seasoned violinist. See Raffaello De Rensis, *Mussolini musicista* (Mantua: Paladino, 1927).

46 Roberto Illiano and Massimiliano Sala, "The Politics of Spectacle: Italian Music and Fascist Propaganda," *Musikologija/Musicology* 12 (2012), 15.

47 Only three Verdi operas were broadcast during the 1941 anniversary (*Un Ballo in maschera* on May 15, *Il Trovatore* on June 21, and *Aida* on July 19). By comparison, six operas were broadcast in 1931 and 24 in 1951, on the occasion of the thirtieth and fiftieth anniversary of the composer's death. See Polo, *Immaginari verdiani*, 90–92.

pearances on film in 1941.⁴⁸ The press was consequently an essential organ for the dissemination of the celebrations; the writings allowed to reach a much wider and diversified audience than that of the concert halls and broadened the scope of the discursive elements associated with the commemorations. The importance given to the print media also demonstrated Mussolini's recognition of the medium's potential to reach the general population and his use of it as a significant tool for propaganda.⁴⁹

"Anticipando le realizzazioni dell'Italia fascista":⁵⁰ Verdi as Forerunner of Fascism?

The ceremony at the Academy of Italy laid the foundations of a rhetoric that thrived throughout the Verdi anniversary and that was entirely coherent with the fascist political agenda. Aspects of Verdi's biography that suited the regime were amplified, such as his patriotism and his Italianness, which proved to be two fundamental leitmotifs of the celebrative discourse. The recurrent depiction of Verdi as a "rural man" also prevailed and helped to make the composer an archetype of the new Italian, thus subtly promoting the myth of the "new man," an Italian regenerated by the "anthropological revolution" undertaken under the *ventennio*.⁵¹ Unsurprisingly, other dimensions of Verdi's biography were overlooked, such as his belonging to the liberal bourgeoisie or his yearning for freedom of speech (which he found in France, unlike Northern Italy, where censorship was imposed by foreign occupation). Such unsuitable notions for fascist authorities were carefully erased from the dominant discourse.

48 In addition to the *Giornale* dedicated to the *mostra verdiana's* inauguration in June 1940, the state-owned Istituto Luce produced *Giornali* on the Casa di riposo per musicisti, Verdi's resting place and a home for retired musicians set up on the composer's initiative, and on the commemoration held in Busseto in January 1941. See Istituto nazionale Luce, "Milano—Una visita alla Casa di Riposo per musicisti e cantanti," *Giornale Luce* C0111, January 21, 1941; Istituto nazionale Luce, "La gloria di Giuseppe Verdi celebrata a Busseto, città natale del Maestro," *Giornale Luce* C0014, January 31, 1941.

49 Pierluigi Allotti, *Giornalisti di regime: La stampa italiana tra fascismo e anti-fascismo (1922–1948)* (Rome: Carocci, 2012), 23.

50 "L'alta intuizione che il Verdi portava anche nei problemi sociali ed economici della Nazione, anticipando nel pensiero e più ancora nella auspicazione, quelle che sono state poi, per il genio e la volontà del Duce, la realizzazione dell'Italia Fascista, in ogni campo delle attività e pratiche del nostro popolo." "Il Duce inaugura all'Accademia la mostra dei cimeli Verdiani," *La Stampa*, June 5, 1940, 4.

51 Gentile, *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme*, 354–55.

Verdi the Italian

Celebrating Verdi involved making the composer the ultimate expression of the national spirit; by presenting his figure and his work as a testimony to the richness of Italy's cultural heritage, the organizers intended to promote Italian cultural superiority and thus nurture the nationalist sentiment—a crucial knot of fascist politics. The composer's Italianness was fundamental to Luzio's inaugural speech at the Academy, which referred to Verdi as an "Italic genius, complete and multifaceted" ("italic" referring to the ancient tribes from which stemmed the Romans, a mindfully selected term) and sustained that he "eminently possessed the virtues of the race."⁵²

The review of the event written by musicologist Alceo Toni, a fervent fascist adherent and music critic for *Il Popolo d'Italia*, emblematically illustrates the ubiquitous nationalism that permeated the literature during the Verdi anniversary. Claiming that "Verdi loved and served Italy with an Italian conscience and sentiment that are unique to national saints and patriarchs,"⁵³ Toni argued that the letters displayed at the *mostra* illustrated the composer's commitment to his homeland, as well as his "distinctly francophobic"⁵⁴ temperament. Toni re-asserted Verdi's Italianness in music, maintaining that the *sinfonia* from *I Vespri siciliani* was "revolutionary Italian"⁵⁵ (*rivoluzionaria italianissima*), although the work was composed according to the genre of grand opéra, originally on a French libretto, and for the Parisian stage.

Evidently magnified, Verdi's antipathy toward France had been highlighted throughout the *Anno verdiano*.⁵⁶ Yet despite some degree of ambivalence, the composer "remained in fundamental sympathy with France,"⁵⁷ according to historian and musicologist John Rosselli; he noticeably felt comfortable in Paris⁵⁸

52 "Come ogni Genio italico, completo e poliedrico, Verdi possedeva in grado eminente le virtù della razza." Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 6.

53 "Verdi ha amato e servito l'Italia con una coscienza e un sentimento italiani che sono soltanto dei Santi e Patriarchi nazionali." Toni, "Mussolini inaugura all'Accademia d'Italia la Mostra dei cimeli verdiani," 4.

54 "Nelle lettere è messa in evidenza sintetica la bontà, l'italianità, il patriottismo verdiano, così marcatamente francofobo." Toni, "Mussolini inaugura all'Accademia d'Italia la Mostra dei cimeli verdiani," 4.

55 "La sinfonia [...] rivoluzionaria italianissima dei Vespri siciliani." Toni, "Mussolini inaugura all'Accademia d'Italia la Mostra dei cimeli verdiani," 4.

56 See for instance Roberto Farinacci, "Celebrazione di Verdi," in *Verdi: Studi e memorie*, ed. Giuseppe Mulè (Rome: Istituto Grafico Tiberino, 1941) 13–14.

57 John Rosselli, *The Life of Verdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 122.

58 Anselm Gerhard, "Verdi-Bilder," in *Verdi Handbuch*, 2nd ed., ed. Anselm Gerhard and Uwe Schweikert (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2013), 20.

and appreciated the freedom and anonymity it provided, besides having shown his openness to French musical expressions. Toni's chauvinist narrative seems to have stemmed from an ambition to overshadow any foreign influence in Verdi's work, or even to undermine the future enemy. It supported the dominant discourse, which advocated the idea that Verdi was an Italian musician *par excellence* who only drew from the legacy of great Italian masters through operatic works (the ultimate Italian musical genre) created on Italian poetry (the means of expression of the Italian people).

Verdi the Patriot

Verdi's Italianness was also discussed in terms of his patriotism, which stemmed from a reignited interest in the "political" Verdi since the beginning of the *ventennio* and aimed at putting the patriotic convictions of the composer at the service of the fascist ideology. Presenting an artist devoted to a "religiously worshiped"⁵⁹ homeland, Luzio asserted that a palpable testimony to Verdi's political engagement was his decision to become a member of the parliament "by mere submission to Cavour's wish"⁶⁰ (proof of an absolute allegiance to the head of state), but also through his involvement in the Risorgimento. Similarly, Alceo Toni stated in *Il Popolo d'Italia* that "Giuseppe Verdi was a landmark of Italianness in the period of our Risorgimento: a propelling force of patriotic enthusiasm in the ardor of his songs, in words and works of virile devotion, with a remarkable Italian pride and passion."⁶¹

Approaching Verdi through the lens of the Italian unification movement had always been common in the literature, although scholarship has recently shown that the making of Verdi as "bard of the Risorgimento" occurred primarily after unification.⁶² The parallel was nonetheless exuberantly exploited during

59 "Prò della Patria, dell'arte, religiosamente adorate." Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 6.

60 "Verdi, per sola sommissione al desiderio di Cavour, accettò la deputazione politica." Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 17.

61 "Giuseppe Verdi fu segnacolo d'italianità nel periodo del nostro Risorgimento: una forza propulsiva di entusiasmi patriottici nell'ardore dei suoi canti, nella parola e nell'opera di virile dedizione, con una fierezza e una passione italiana esemplari." Toni, "Mussolini inaugura all'Accademia d'Italia la Mostra dei cimeli verdiani," 4.

62 See in particular Roger Parker, *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) and "Arpa d'or de' fatidici vati": *The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s* (Parma: Istituto nazionale di studi verdiani, 1997); Birgit Pauls, *Verdi und das Risorgimento: Ein politischer Mythos im Prozess der Nationenbildung* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996); Mary Ann Smart, "Verdi, Italian Romanticism, and the Risorgimento," in *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, ed. Scott L. Balthazar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29–45. For more recent accounts, see Roger Parker, "Verdi Politico: A Wounded

the 1941 celebrations; Verdi was depicted as a leading figure of the movement, an “*aïodos* of the Risorgimento”⁶³ who fought against the oppressor with an “indisputably national”⁶⁴ music. His early operas, such as *Nabucco*, *Ernani*, *Attila*, and *La Battaglia di Legnano*, were often referred to as illustrating the patriotic fervor of a composer who, through politically charged plots, shed light on the subjugation of the Italian people under foreign yoke. Although they did not arouse much enthusiasm on stage, having been sparsely performed during the *Anno verdiano*, these operas were frequently mentioned in writings and speeches as testifying to Verdi’s significance in the risorgimental epic, as fascist official Roberto Farinacci argued in his discourse broadcast on national radio (Eiar) in December 1940:

The audacious allusions in *Ernani*, the heroism and love of the homeland in *Giovanna d’Arco*, the remote temerity in *La Battaglia di Legnano*, the hatred and anger against the foreigner in *I Vespri*, the glory of ancient republics in *Simon Boccanegra*, the invocation to Italy in *Attila*, are the voices of the soul and faith of this great man of the people (*popolano*) of Italy with an impetuous and generous heart, of this hero of the Risorgimento, powerful as Garibaldi with his sword on the battlefields.⁶⁵

Exalting the myth of Italy’s unification allowed the authorities to take advantage of the symbolic value of the Risorgimento, a movement emblematic of the Italians’ struggles in the face of foreign domination that echoed fascist Italy’s determination to claim its position of prestige in the international political arena. The Risorgimento also materialized the genesis of the modern state, whose natural outcome was manifestly fascist Italy, and the patriotic spirit that

Cliché Regroups,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 4 (2012): 427–36; Mary Ann Smart, “Magical Thinking: Reason and Emotion in Some Recent Literature on Verdi and Politics,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 4 (2012): 437–47; Mary Ann Smart, “How political were Verdi’s operas? Metaphors of progress in the reception of *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013): 190–204.

63 “Aedo del Risorgimento.” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 17.

64 “Indiscutibilmente nazionale.” Ottavio Tivy, “Verdi e il suo tempo,” in *Verdi: Studi e memorie*, 331.

65 “Le ardite allusioni dell’*Ernani*, l’eroismo e l’amor di patria in *Giovanna d’Arco*, gli ardimenti lontani de *La Battaglia di Legnano*, l’odio e l’ira contro lo straniero ne *I Vespri*, la gloria delle antiche repubbliche nel *Simon Boccanegra*, la invocazione all’Italia nell’*Attila*, sono le voci dell’anima e della fede di questo grande popolano d’Italia dal cuore impetuoso e generoso, di questo eroe del Risorgimento, potente come Garibaldi con la spada sui campi di battaglia.” The speech was published in the commemorative book *Verdi: Studi e memorie*, edited by the *Sindacato fascista musicisti* and its secretary, Giuseppe Mulè. Roberto Farinacci, “Celebrazione di Verdi,” in *Verdi: Studi e memorie*, 11.

motivated the risorgimental upheavals became a catalyst for the process of unification undertaken by the fascists, who intended to strengthen the national identity still fragmented by the country's late unification. The multiplicity of political resonances offered by the Risorgimento helps to comprehend why Verdi, as a key figure of the movement, enjoyed such attention in 1941.

The politicization of Verdi's music and figure increased during the *Anno verdiano*, as the conflict evolved. Verdi became a fighter, referred to as a "man who wins" or a "tireless wrestler,"⁶⁶ and the creator of a music depicted in particularly martial terms, endowed, for instance, with "warlike and patriotic tones."⁶⁷ Such a terminology echoed the fascist military culture and intended to engage the composer in the war, presupposing his approval of the Duce's foreign policy, as asserted in a commemorative leaflet published in Parma: "Verdi is more relevant than ever in 1941, a year which sees Italy in a fierce struggle against Great Britain. He is among us today, as we fight for Italy's primacy and for its obvious imperial destiny."⁶⁸

Verdi the Man

Portraying Verdi as a fighter allowed to align him with the political, but also ideological fascist agenda; the composer was indeed embedded in a militarist discourse, but he was also at the heart of an anti-modernist rhetoric aiming to depict him as the archetype of an ideal masculinity as defined by the fascist regime. Throughout the *Anno verdiano*, the anti-modernist stance was evidenced by assertions regarding ruralism, anti-urbanism, anti-intellectualism, anti-bourgeoisie, and pronatalism—values essential to Mussolini's doctrine.⁶⁹ The dissemination of an anti-intellectual and anti-bourgeois composer emerged prominently at the *mostra's* inauguration; in his speech, Luzio presented Verdi as a pragmatic artist, who had a "clear vision of human things, psychological acuity, rude authenticity."⁷⁰ According to the historian, the correspondence between

66 "L'uomo che vince"; "Il lottatore infaticabile." Enrico Magni Dufflocq, "Commento alla vita di Verdi," in *Verdi: Studi e memorie*, 24.

67 "Accenti guerrieri e patriottici." Romolo Giraldi, "Dall' 'Oberto' a 'La Battaglia di Legnano,'" in *Verdi: Studi e memorie*, 48.

68 "Verdi è più che mai attuale in questo 1941 che vede l'Italia in aspra lotta contro la Gran Bretagna. Egli è oggi fra noi, che stiamo combattendo per il primato d'Italia e per il suo certo destino imperiale." *Teatro Regio: XL Anniversario della morte di Giuseppe Verdi* (Parma: Fresching, 1941), 16–17.

69 Sandro Bellassai, "The Masculine Mystique: Antimodernism and Virility in Fascist Italy," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005), 315.

70 "Limpida visione delle umane cose, acume psicologico, veridicità rude." Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 6.

Verdi and Piroli revealed the composer's objection to urbanism, his skepticism towards academics and the "sterility" of universities, and his disappointment in the face of a lack of support for the rural class.⁷¹ These statements aimed at distancing Verdi from intellectualism, perceived under the *ventennio* as a "pathology of masculinity"⁷² (although paradoxically Verdi was celebrated prominently at the heart of the fascist intellectual power), as well as from the bourgeoisie, understood by fascism as the result of a masculine identity corrupted by modern civilization. Moreover, Verdi's discontent served to convey the idea of the inadequacy of political liberalism and to reinforce the belief in a democratic immobilism that the fascist regime claimed to tackle upon its rise to power.

Throughout the *ventennio*, fascist anti-bourgeois sentiment was conveyed by exalting the values of the countryside and concomitantly praising the peasant world.⁷³ Consequently, Verdi's rurality had been frequently exploited during the anniversary, notably at the *mostra's* opening; Luzio emphasized the composer's love for the land and quoted him when he claimed to Piroli (1878): "I was born and I still remain a peasant, who needs air and complete freedom in all respects!"⁷⁴ Through his ruralist depiction of the composer, Luzio also commended Verdi's lifestyle as a landowner, which allowed the historian to address the peninsula's long agrarian tradition (that the fascist regime intended to perpetuate): "Verdi always resorted to Piroli to purchase rustic lands, [...] driven by the healthy love of the land, by an atavistic predilection for agriculture, as a source, not only of national wealth, but also as a nursery of the purest forces of a fruitful people, laborious producer."⁷⁵

Since the peasant was often presented as the quintessence of "natural" or untamed masculinity in fascist discourse, not forgetting that rural population symbolized "an anthropologically purer nucleus of a compact and organic

71 "L'Urbanesimo ebbe in Verdi uno dei primi dichiarati nemici: dei più decisi nel proclamare che troppe sterili lauree dottorali si conquistassero nelle Università; poche proprietari sfruttassero le ricchezze della terra con modernità di metodi, e i reggitori dello Stato a lor volta non discernessero i pericoli che prima o poi dovevano scaturire dall'incuria per l'economia rurale, per i lavoratori di campagna, di città, scuotendo le basi stesse dello Stato." Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 7.

72 Bellasai, "The Masculine Mystique," 321.

73 Bellasai, "The Masculine Mystique," 314.

74 "Io sono nato e mi conservo ancora un contadino, che ha bisogno d'aria e di una completa libertà in tutto e per tutto!" Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 11–12.

75 "Al Piroli aveva Verdi sempre parimenti ricorso per gli acquisti di fondi rustici, [...] guidato dal sano amore della terra, da una predilezione atavica per l'agricoltura, qual fonte, non solo di ricchezza nazionale, si anche come vivaio delle più pure forze di un popolo fecondo, laborioso produttore." Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 6–7.

national community,⁷⁶ portraying Verdi as a rural man aimed at depicting a pragmatic, manual and tied-to-the-soil artisan, therefore, a virile man. This strategy of “de-urbanizing” and, consequently, “de-bourgeoisizing” Verdi (the “bourgeois” symbolizing the well-off urbanized man⁷⁷) was manifested throughout the *Anno verdiano* by writings devoted to the composer’s peasant identity, as well as in reports written by authors who visited Verdi’s village near Parma and highlighted the bucolic, pastoral, and rural landscape.⁷⁸

The attention paid to the composer’s rural identity also served to depict Verdi as an accessible figure. While referring to Verdi’s “contact with the sufferings of the humble,”⁷⁹ Luzio conveyed a morally exemplary figure (a “model of civil wisdom”⁸⁰) by stressing his kindness and his “profoundly altruistic”⁸¹ nature. Verdi’s proximity with ruralism was also related to his origins; having grown up in the small village of Le Roncole, near Parma, the composer was presented as having had a modest, even poor and hard childhood, but who rose to fame thanks to his talent, his determination, and above all his sustained efforts. This narrative allowed to emphasize on the work ethics and its related qualities such as discipline and rigor, while drawing parallels with the demanding, even exhausting—but profoundly virile—lifestyle of the peasants.

Although Verdi had nurtured his peasant identity during his lifetime and portrayed himself as a “simple man” (notably through particularly restrained clothes⁸²), the composer was not a *contadino* per se; as an adult, he was a wealthy landowner. He came from a relatively prosperous family, whose parents were not workers of the land but shopkeepers and had been able to provide Verdi with a quality education—a privilege given the high rate of illiteracy at the

76 Bellassai, “The Masculine Mystique,” 318. The author refers to Pier Giorgio Zunino, *L’ideologia del fascismo: Miti, credenze e valori nella stabilizzazione del regime* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985), 309.

77 Bellassai, “The Masculine Mystique,” 323.

78 See for instance Giuseppe Adami, “La Casa di riposo per i musicisti,” *Scenario* 9, no. 11 (November 1940): 494–96; Carlo Gatti, “Verdi nel 40° anniversario della morte: Ritorno a Sant’Agata,” *L’illustrazione italiana* 68, no. 4 (January 26, 1941): 105–34; Federico Ghisi, “Verdi popolaresco,” in *Verdi: Studi e memorie*, 315–23; Remo Giazotto, “Popolo e valutazione artistica: L’arte di Verdi in clima fascista,” *Musica d’oggi* 22, no. 8–9 (August–September 1940): 233–35; Tenato Liguori, “Giuseppe Verdi rurale,” in *Verdi: Studi e memorie*, 345–48; and Luigi Tonelli, “Una visita ai luoghi verdiani: L’autografo della sinfonia dell’Aida,” *Cremona* 12, no. 8–9 (September–October 1940): 369–70.

79 “Contatto con le sofferenze degli umili.” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 12.

80 “E tale egli fu [...] modello di sapienza civile.” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 12.

81 “Profondamente altruistica.” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 6, 13.

82 Gerhard, “Verdi-Bilder,” 21; Parker, *Leonora’s Last Act*, 100.

time.⁸³ The narrative of a “self-made man” also had been fueled by the composer himself; it had been enhanced under fascism, since it suited the rhetoric of the regime, which fostered male figures in action, but Verdi had always been able to surround himself with resourceful people from which he received assistance to advance his career (such as his greatest patron, Antonio Barezzi⁸⁴).

Staging an accessible figure was also manifested by testifying to the composer’s humanness; while recognizing his unique legacy to Italian culture, the commemorators presented Verdi first and foremost as a man, endowed with a fine sensitivity and subject to human sufferings. Throughout the *Anno verdiano*, Verdi’s vulnerability was illustrated by the recurrent reference to the death of his two infants, Virginia and Icilio, and his first wife Margherita Barezzi, between 1838 and 1840. Whereas some commemorators underlined the composer’s despair, others, including Luzio, insisted on the absence of Verdi’s progeny; while Mussolini had undertaken a pronatalist campaign against Italy’s declining birthrate, mentioning Verdi’s inability to provide a lineage to his homeland showed an even greater fatality.

This episode also served to demonstrate Verdi’s moral strength: despite this tragedy, the artist’s subsequent success and glory illustrated his resilience and his combativeness, having been able to rise above the misfortunes that overwhelmed him. This archetypal heroic narrative of struggle, overcoming, and triumph was central to the discourse surrounding mythical heroes, such as musicologist Sanna Pederson exemplified with the case of Beethoven.⁸⁵ By showing Verdi’s “indomitable zeal to overcome the obstacles and reach the summit,”⁸⁶ Luzio reinforced a narrative that, according to Pederson’s analysis, deepened the composer’s masculinity while securing his position at the heart of the Western musical canon.

Verdi the Myth

Verdi’s “heroization” also nurtured the cult of the artist as a national myth; exalting Verdi’s genius was preeminent throughout the *Anno verdiano*, with pompous depictions that sought to testify to the composer’s legendary, even “titanic” or “Olympian” stature. However, the discourse conveyed at the *mostra* was rather contained and not imbued with the strong universalist rhetoric that

83 Gerhard, “Verdi-Bilder,” 3.

84 Gerhard, “Verdi-Bilder,” 6.

85 See Sanna Pederson, “Beethoven and Masculinity,” in *Beethoven*, ed. Michael Spitzer (London: Routledge, 2015), 473–91.

86 “*Indomita foga nel superare gli ostacoli per raggiungere la vetta.*” Luzio, *Per Giuseppe Verdi*, 6.

was inherent to the discursive landscape of 1941. Commemorators indeed suggested that Verdi's music, universally understandable (since it was particularly accomplished), addressed all of humanity—an assertion that subtly promoted fascist Italy's cultural expansionism. This topos had not been exploited at the Academy in June 1940, when the discourse revolved around the exaltation of Verdi's national spirit.

These discursive peculiarities could have resulted, on the one hand, from the Duce's attendance; the tributes paid to Verdi probably had to be constrained so that the composer did not overshadow Mussolini—a central figure whose presence was widely publicized. Verdi then had to be depicted as an exemplary figure, but not too flamboyant. On the other hand, the context surrounding the *mostra* may have influenced the discourse; while a great campaign of seduction was deployed to persuade the nation to go to war, presenting Verdi as an Italian, human, and accessible artist may have been deemed more appropriate to establish a connection with the people, to unite the Italians around a common heritage, and to unify the population before the outbreak of hostilities. Since the discourse was directed to the forthcoming home front, universalism was not as essential as it was when Italy became a belligerent.

Verdi under Democracy, Fascist Continuities?

The *mostra verdiana* organized at the Academy did not enjoy great longevity and terminated abruptly on June 15, 1940, in order to protect the potentially endangered exhibits following Italy's entry into the war.⁸⁷ Despite its short duration, the *mostra* had nevertheless been a major display of the regime's self-celebration, which took part in an unprecedented propagandistic deployment on the eve of the conflict. According to Paola Cagiano and Susanna Panetta, the *mostra* responded to the need of conveying the image of a strong and united people at a significant and historic moment:

through the expressive force of the Maestro, [the exhibition] gave an image of Italy's 'power, glory' and reminded the Italians that they belonged to the same nation, to the same culture, to the same tradition. The choice of the

87 Cagiano and Panetta, "Giuseppe Verdi e l'Accademia dei Lincei," 442–43.

inauguration date, June 4, 1940, when Italy was only five days away from going to war, could perhaps be interpreted in that sense.⁸⁸

Moreover, the *mostra* could be seen as a tangible expression of Verdi's appropriation by the regime, his "import" at the heart of the fascist intellectual power. This reading contrasted considerably with subsequent commemorations, such as those on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the composer's death in 1951, during which Luigi Einaudi, president of Italy, traveled to Milan and later to Parma to honor Verdi. Drawing a parallel with the 1951 anniversary also brings out numerous post-war resonances and attests that the Verdian mythmaking continued to be manipulated and reinterpreted, but at the service of new political convictions: the celebrations no longer promoted a hegemonic and oppressive regime, but rather supported the return to democracy in a context of political fragility.

Musicologist Harriet Boyd-Bennett has underlined many similarities between the commemorations of 1941 and 1951, which included, on the organizational level, the recurrence of the commemorators, the material (as texts from 1941 were republished in 1951), and the activities (commemorative speeches, exhibitions of memorabilia, musical events, etc.).⁸⁹ At the same time, on the discursive level, Boyd-Bennett pointed out that the topoi exploited in 1951 were also surprisingly similar to those emphasized under the fascist regime. For instance, Verdi's quintessential Italianness was still acutely significant in 1951, but rather aimed at rebuilding a fragmented national identity undermined by a conflict that ended in civil war (1943–1945). The universalist rhetoric was also exploited, but no longer to support the expansionist and dominating ambitions of a megalomaniac Duce; they instead sought to make the composer a universal, tolerant, and open-minded figure—an openness that Italy advocated at a time when the country sought to arise from its geopolitical isolation and vouch for the new democratic ideals.

Another major continuity regarded the predominance of the "political" Verdi, a topos that helped to nurture the myth of the composer as an icon of the Risorgimento, a cultural counterpart to Garibaldi. The Risorgimento was also central to post-war historiography and served to establish a national continuity

88 "Una mostra che, attraverso la forza espressiva del Maestro, desse un'immagine di 'potenza, di gloria' dell'Italia e fosse un richiamo per gli italiani di appartenenza alla stessa Patria, alla stessa cultura, alla stessa tradizione. In questo senso, forse, può essere interpretata la scelta della data dell'inaugurazione, il 4 giugno del 1940, quando mancavano soli cinque giorni all'entrata in guerra dell'Italia." Cagiano and Panetta, "Giuseppe Verdi e l'Accademia dei Lincei," 442.

89 Harriet Boyd-Bennett, *Opera in Postwar Venice: Cultural Politics and the Avant-garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 74–75.

between the post-fascist Italian State and the unification movement⁹⁰: the struggles that materialized the genesis of the modern state were henceforth paired with the partisan war fought against the Germans from 1943 to 1945, an episode soon described as the “Second Risorgimento.”⁹¹ This narrative, which focused on remembering the *biennio* (1943–1945), sought to give weight to the (mainly communist) resistance—and thus reinforce adherence to the relatively strong Communist Party—and to foster, through the risorgimental parallel, the “resurgence” trope reclaimed by the Catholics—who were another predominant political force in post-war Italy.⁹² Moreover, the emphasis on the *biennio* allowed to supplant the *ventennio* in the Italian collective consciousness and thus promote a narrative that overshadowed the fascist past.⁹³ This process of “selective remembering and wilful forgetting”⁹⁴ largely contributed to the collective amnesia that marked the post-war Italian attitude.⁹⁵ Authorities sought to let fascism fall into oblivion in order to avoid internal divisions and hasten Italy’s democratic transition, despite the many continuities it generated in Italian socio-political life.⁹⁶ This denial of the fascist past, which was also reflected in music, thus explained the echoes of 1941 found in the 1951 commemorations, as Boyd-Bennett noted: “the fact that the fascist regime had exploited an almost identical strategy only a decade earlier, at the state-sponsored fortieth anniversary celebrations, was conveniently forgotten.”⁹⁷

Revealing the numerous continuities in the post-war anniversary bears witness to the ambiguities and ambivalences that impregnated the return to democracy in Italy and illustrates the fact that fascism was not eradicated by the fall of Mussolini’s regime. These observations also indicate that the Verdi who was celebrated embodied political ideals both before and after the war.

90 Harriet Boyd-Bennett, *Opera in Postwar Venice*, 74–77.

91 Claudio Fogu, “*Italiani brava gente*: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture of Italian Politics of Memory,” in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 149–51.

92 Fogu, “*Italiani brava gente*,” 151.

93 Fogu, “*Italiani brava gente*,” 150–51.

94 Robert Ventresca, “Debating the Meaning of Fascism in Contemporary Italy,” *Modern Italy* 11, no. 2 (2006), 189.

95 Hannah Malone, “Legacies of Fascism: Architecture, Heritage and Memory in Contemporary Italy,” *Modern Italy* 22, no. 4 (2017), 448–49, 464–465; Marta Petrusiewicz, “The Hidden Pages of Contemporary Italian History: War Crimes, War Guilt and Collective Memory,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9, no. 3 (2004), 270; Ventresca, “Debating the Meaning of Fascism in Contemporary Italy,” 196.

96 Ventresca, “Debating the Meaning of Fascism in Contemporary Italy,” 196.

97 Boyd-Bennett, *Opera in Postwar Venice*, 74.

Although his figure and his work may have been reclaimed by both democratic and dictatorial powers, the political reappropriation of the composer had fundamentally similar goals: to elicit approval for a political and/or ideological project that was considered legitimate. As Fiamma Nicolodi pointed out, Verdi remained after the fall of the regime “a ‘father of the homeland,’ a living embodiment (through the examples offered by his art, his life, his character) of the Italian state, henceforth free and united around the new institutional form of the republic.”⁹⁸ Indeed, Verdi continued and still continues to be put at the service of power, fashioned according to the political forces that celebrate him, whether on the left or on the right, democratic or totalitarian.

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98 “Verdi insomma, anche a regime caduto e a guerra conclusa resta a tutti gli effetti un ‘padre della patria,’ incarnazione vivente (attraverso gli esempi offerti dalla sua arte, dalla sua vita, dal suo carattere) dello stato italiano, ora libero e unito intorno alla nuova forma istituzionale della repubblica.” Nicolodi, “Mitografia verdiana nel primo Novecento,” 76.

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