The Spoken Text.

CD 1

[1] **Sound of lowing cattle, cowbells, birdsong, bleating sheep**

As with Brahms, Dvorák and Haydn, who also grew from humble origins, it would be an exaggeration to describe Verdi's life as a classic 'rags to riches' saga, but that's how *he* described it. The standard image of the poor, almost illiterate peasant boy who walked barefoot from one village to another to save his only pair of shoes comes straight from the composer himself. Throughout his life Verdi represented himself as a peasant, and the evidence he gave to an authoritative interviewer late in life was treated as gospel by one biographer after another.

VERDI: Alas! I was born in a poor village and had no way of teaching myself anything. A wretched little piano was put under my hands, and in time I began to write notes… notes upon notes. And that… that's all there was.

Well, not quite. Contrary to legend, he wasn't a peasant – he didn't even come from peasant stock. His father and mother both came from a long line of minor landowners, publicans, and tradesmen whose family records stretch as far back as the middle of the eighteenth century. Nor, again contrary to the claims of even reputable biographies, from as recently as the late 1960s, were his parents illiterate. Indeed his father served for fifteen years as secretary to the treasury of his local church and letters in his own hand have survived, one of which was actually put on exhibition as late as 1894, when Verdi himself was still very much alive. But it's perfectly true that he was born into relative poverty, and it's entirely possible that the barefoot boy of legend was not a figment of anyone's imagination.

His exceptional intelligence became obvious early on and at the age of three he was having private tuition in Latin and Italian, and probably learned at least the basics of

music not long afterwards. His teacher was Pietro Baistrocchi, the organist at the village church, and it was he who persuaded Verdi's father to buy that 'miserable little piano'. By the time he was seven or eight, he was already deputising for Baistrocchi as church organist, and when Baistrocchi died in 1822 Verdi officially succeeded him in the post, having now advanced to the age of nine. A year or so later, he entered the so-called 'gymnasium' at the nearby town of Busseto, which was to be his main base, on and off, for the rest of his life. And it was here, during these first few years, that he was effectively adopted by a generous and wealthy local merchant, Antonio Barezzi, who was to become perhaps the single greatest influence (certainly the greatest benefactor) in Verdi's life. From this point onwards, Verdi's real father more or less drops out of the picture.

In 1825, the thirteen-year-old Peppino, as he was called, entered the music school of Ferdinando Provesi, the organist at Busseto's main church and the town's official municipal music master. Within four years he'd effectively become Provesi's assistant, rather than his pupil, not only teaching at the school but playing the organ, copying parts for the Busseto Philharmonic Society, directing rehearsals, and appearing in concert as a pianist. It was here, too, that he first began to compose in earnest – and in bulk:

VERDI: From the ages of twelve to eighteen years (the age at which I went to Milan to study counterpoint) I composed a variety of pieces: marches for brass band by the hundred, and just about as many little orchestral works that were used in church, in the theatre or at concerts, several concertos and sets of variations for piano, which I played myself at concerts, a lot of serenades, cantatas (arias, duets, many trios and so on), plus various pieces of church music, all but one of which, a *Stabat Mater*, I've now forgotten completely.

Almost from the start of Barezzi's interest in him, Verdi had spent much of his time at his benefactor's house, and in 1831 he moved in. At some point along the way, he also fell in love with Barezzi's eldest daughter, Margherita, who had become his pupil and was later to become his wife.

By this time it was obvious to everyone that Verdi needed, and deserved, a higher degree of training than anything Busseto could offer, and it was decided that he should complete his musical education in Milan. He duly went there, applied to the Conservatory for admission, and to the general consternation of all his supporters in Busseto he was rejected. In the words of the official report to the Conservatory's director:

REPORTER: Signor Angeleri, professor of the pianoforte, observed that the said Verdi would have to change his hand position, which, he said, would be difficult at such an advanced age. As for his compositions, I agree entirely with Signor Piantanida, professor of counterpoint and vice-registrar, that if he gives himself with proper attention, patience and industry to study the rules of counterpoint, he will be able to control the genuine imagination he undoubtedly possesses, and could turn out creditably as a composer.

Creditably! Hmm. Well,… yes! I'll drink to that.

2 **La Traviata: Brindisi 'Libiam ne' lieti calici'**

3 The famous 'Brindisi', or 'drinking song', from *La Traviata.*

Barezzi was disappointed, shocked even, at Verdi's rejection by the Conservatory, but his faith in him was unshakeable and he determined that Verdi should stay on in Milan and study privately with the esteemed Vincenzo Lavigna. This he did, for three years, as it turned out, with Barezzi bearing most of the cost. Lavigna was a conservative and a demanding task master. Verdi worked unflaggingly, and, despite the claims of many writers, admired his teacher.

VERDI: I wrote very few original compositions at that time: a couple of orchestral pieces – those, I remember, were performed at a private concert in Milan (in which house I can no longer recall) – then I had a cantata performed at the home of Count Renato Borromeo and a number of pieces, most of them

comic, by the way, which my teacher made me do as exercises and which were not even scored. I was with Lavigna for three years, during which time I did nothing but canons and fugues, fugues and canons, of every kind. He taught me nothing about orchestration or how to treat theatrical music. No-one did. Lavigna was something of a pedant, very strong on counterpoint, of course, and the only music for which he seemed to have any use was that of his own teacher, Paisiello. But he was learned, and he taught me a lot. I only wish all teachers were like him.

Verdi's studies in Milan, though, were interrupted by what amounted almost to a civil war back in Busseto.

In 1820 his old teacher Provesi died, leaving his teaching-post open. Barezzi and his fellow Verdi-supporters simply assumed that Verdi would fill it, and Verdi's own ambitions at that point may well have gone no further. There's no evidence that he saw a great career ahead of him, but then there's no evidence that he didn't. Anyway, there was a rival candidate for the post, backed by the clergy, and *his* supporters were no less determined than Verdi's. They played fast and loose with the rules of the game, so to speak, and their man got the job – or stole the job, as far as the Verdians were concerned. The result was uproar: violent clashes on the streets, arrests, prosecutions, literary lampoons, the lot. And all this over the appointment of a musician in a small Italian town. Nor was it just a matter of local concern. Among a long list of other reports, suggestions, and injunctions, the Bishop of Borgo San Donnino, who supported the rival candidate, issued a decree to the Home Secretary of Parma.

BISHOP: Let the civil *and military* authorities be ordered to watch with the utmost vigilance, and to crush the rebellion at its birth.

The thing dragged on and was settled eventually in Verdi's favour, but it wasn't until 1836, well after the completion of his studies in Milan, that he was actually enabled to take up the position as Busseto's municipal master of music. By this time, he was in fact contemplating another, far better paid job elsewhere, in Monza, but his supporters were

having none of it. He was told that if he attempted to leave Busseto he would be forcibly prevented from doing so. But there was one major consolation. With his position now settled he could at last marry Margherita Barezzi, who became his wife on the 4th of May 1836, thus making Antonio, who had already loved Verdi as a son for many years, one very happy father-in-law.

In the next three years Verdi devoted himself to all the often-humdrum activities required of his position, but his mind was already looking beyond Busseto, whose deep partisan divisions had already soured his feelings for it. In any case, ever since his experiences in Milan his eye had been fixed on the opera house. Unbeknown to all but a trusted few, he'd begun negotiations with Milan even before his marriage. Thanks in part to the influence of the well-known soprano Giuseppina Strepponi, the management at La Scala, still one of the most famous opera houses in the world, agreed in 1838 to mount Verdi's first opera *Oberto* in its next season. Without even waiting for its first production, he resigned from his post in Busseto and moved with his young family (he'd now become a father) to Milan. No-one would pretend that *Oberto* is a great opera, but well before the overture finished, the audience was aware that this was a young composer worth watching.

4 **Overture to 'Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio'**

5 The overture to Verdi's first surviving opera, *Oberto*.

The opera was not a sensation, but it ran to fourteen performances and was rewarded with a commission for three more operas, to be delivered at eight-month intervals. Not bad going – and a great tribute to the judgement and perception of La Scala's manager and impresario Bartolomeo Merelli.

The first of the three new operas was a so-called 'opera buffa' – a comic opera – which but for his final work is almost the last thing anyone would associate with Verdi, even today. It was called *Un giorno di regno*, and most people, even Verdi fans, have never seen or heard it in any form. Those who have are generally agreed that it's one of the weakest things he ever wrote, and that it's almost spectacularly unfunny. But then as

Verdi recalled many years later, the circumstances surrounding its composition were hardly conducive to humour.

VERDI: At the time, you see, I was all alone. Absolutely alone. In the space of a mere two months the three people I cherished most in my whole life, my wife and my two dear children, had been taken from me forever: my family was utterly destroyed.

This is an extraordinary statement for Verdi to have made, even if it was four decades later. And he stuck by it. But the truth is that the first of his children was born at Busseto in 1837 and died there less than eighteen months later, even before the Verdis left for Milan, while the second child was born in 1838, again in Busseto, and died in Milan in October 1839, even before *Oberto* was produced. Verdi's wife, though, did indeed die while he was working on *Un giorno di regno*, and of course this did affect the work's composition. Nevertheless, whatever the shortcomings of the opera as a whole, the *overture* is a great tribute to Verdi's professionalism, and to his powers of resilience in the face of adversity. This certainly doesn't *sound* like the music of a man consumed by grief.

6 **Overture to 'Un giorno di regno'**

7 Part of the overture to Verdi's comic opera *Un giorno di regno*.

In the event, the opera was a calamitous failure. It was withdrawn after a single performance, after which the grief-stricken Verdi decided to forget about composing and asked Merelli to cancel his contract. Merelli agreed but assured Verdi that if ever he *were* to start composing again, the stage of La Scala was his for the asking. For the next few months Verdi was mired in deep depression, hardly ever emerging from his dingy lodgings in Milan. Interestingly, he seems to have had no impulse to return to Busseto, where Barezzi would have welcomed him with open arms. Merelli, for his part, had demonstrated his undiminished faith in the composer by reviving *Oberto* a mere six weeks after the disaster of *Un giorno di regno*. In the following winter it had a further

six performances in Genoa, which Verdi attended. Picking up where they'd left off, Merelli now tried again to interest him in a new opera, as Verdi himself related many years later.

VERDI: It was snowing heavily, I remember, and taking me by the arm, Merelli invited me to accompany him to his office. On the way there, he confessed that was in difficulties over the new opera he had undertaken to present. It appears that he had assigned the commission to the composer Nicolai, who was dissatisfied with the libretto. 'Can you believe it?' Merelli said, 'A magnificent, extraordinary libretto by Solera, no less. Wonderful dramatic situations, great, beautiful lines; but that crazy Nicolai won't even take a second look at it! And I have nothing else to hand that I can offer him.' On reaching his office, Merelli handed me the rejected manuscript. 'Imagine turning down such a thing! Take it, Verdi. Read it. You'll see.' 'No!' I said. 'Thank you, but no! I'm in no mood to be reading librettos!' But he wouldn't give up. Literally forcing it upon me, he said, 'Have a look at it, I ask no more than that, and then bring it back to me'. Reluctantly, I agreed, took my leave of him, and started for home. As I walked, I was overcome by an indefinable feeling of sickness, consumed by an immense sadness, and in a state of terrible agitation! When I got home, I threw the manuscript down almost violently, and stood straight in front of it. As it struck the table, the bundle of pages fell open. I found myself, to my surprise, staring at the page before me and saw the line 'Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate'. I read through the lines that followed and they made a tremendous impression on me. I read on, and then, still resolute in my determination never to compose again, I forced myself to stop reading and went to bed. But *Nabucco* would not leave me in peace. I couldn't sleep: I got up and read the libretto right through – not once, not twice, but three times over. By sunrise I found I knew most of it by heart. In spite of this, however, I could not escape my vow of renunciation, and on the next day returned the manuscript to Merelli. 'Beautiful, isn't it?' he said. I agreed. 'Then set it to music!' he cried. Again I declined. 'I wouldn't dream of it. I want nothing to do with it.' But he paid no attention. 'Set it to music! Set it to music!' he kept

repeating. He thrust the manuscript into my overcoat pocket, took me by the shoulders, pushed me forcibly out of his office, and locked the door in my face! I returned home. And slowly it began to come. One day, one line; one day, another; first a note, then a phrase, and so, bit by little bit, almost in spite of myself, the opera was composed.

By October, it was complete, and when it was produced at La Scala on the 9th of March, 1842 it was a huge success. Not least the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves, 'Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate', the very line which had first caught Verdi's eye.

8 **Nabucco: Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves 'Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate'**

9 To say that *Nabucco* enjoyed a success is really carrying understatement to the limit. As the writer Michele Lessona reported:

LESSONA: The tremendous success of *Nabucco* aroused such enthusiasm as had never previously been seen. The night after the premiere no one in Milan slept; the next day *Nabucco* was on everyone's lips. No-one was talking about anything but Verdi; and even fashion and cuisine borrowed his name, making hats *alla Verdi,* shawls *alla Verdi,* and sauces *alla Verdi.* Verdi was besieged by impresarios from every city in Italy, all making him the highest possible offers for a new opera, written specifically for them.

Forty years on, Verdi remembered it all as though it were yesterday.

VERDI: Yes, I think it can fairly be said that with this opera my artistic career was decisively launched. Albeit, I had many obstacles to overcome, but I have no doubt whatever that *Nabucco* was born under a lucky star, so lucky that all the things that could have gone wrong did not, but actually helped to make it a success!

10 **Overture to 'Nabucco'**

11 The overture to *Nabucco*.

In the cast of that first production, as with Verdi's first opera *Oberto*, was Giuseppina Strepponi, whose support of Verdi, like Merelli's, was unwavering throughout these early years. The fact that she was also Merelli's mistress at the time, and ostensibly the mother of his illegitimate children, is another matter, which as we'll see was to haunt her to the point of near-tragedy later on.

Nabucco not only made Verdi's reputation in Italy, it carried his name and work abroad for the first time. With his next two operas, *I Lombardi* and *Ernani*, he established himself as a household name right across musical Europe, though neither of them measures up to *Nabucco*, let alone the best of the operas still to come.

Verdi himself described his next period as his 'years in the galleys', when he turned out one opera after another, almost like a one-man assembly line, at the rate of roughly two a year. Some were duds, others, not necessarily much better, scored big hits, and Verdi's tunes began to turn up on barrel organs on the streets of many cities. Most of these early operas have long since fallen by the wayside but it's obvious from countless reviews and articles that they caused quite a stir at the time. This, for instance, from the Neapolitan correspondent of *Rivista di Roma* in 1845:

REPORTER: When news spread through Naples that Verdi had arrived and would be present at the San Carlo theatre that very evening, for a performance of *I due Foscari*, the public swarmed upon the theatre to see the famous composer in person. The galleries and the vast hall of San Carlo, fairly overflowing with spectators, presented a brilliant scene. And the performers, inspired, as if by a charge of electricity, by Verdi's presence, quite surpassed themselves, so that the opera, though already very familiar, seemed quite new, such was the effect produced in the auditorium on that memorable evening. All the singers were warmly applauded, but the greatest enthusiasm of the audience was reserved for the composer. He had repeatedly to appear on the stage amid the most cordial, loud and unanimous applause from all present.

And in the case of *Attila*, produced a year later, it was the same story, only more so, as we learn from Verdi's friend, pupil, and long-time assistant Emanuele Muzio.

MUZIO: Furore! Furore! Furore! *Attila* took the roof off, as the journalists say. Tumultuous applause after every number, and endless recalls, though the management wouldn't allow encores. The theatre was so packed that it was impossible to move; they opened the doors at four o'clock and we had to wait until half past seven. La Tadolini and Moriani sang as no one else can sing. Marini was unsurpassable, both as actor and singer. De Bassini sustained his role well. In short, all the singers and the opera aroused fanatical enthusiasm and uproar enough to make the Old and the New Testaments tremble.

But with all this success and popularity, Verdi was far from happy. Apart from anything else, the treatment of his operas in the theatres left a lot to be desired, even with his great supporter Merelli in charge. As Muzio reported after the opening night of *Attila* in 1846:

MUZIO: It must be admitted that the *production* was appalling. The sun rose before the music indicated the sunrise. The sea, instead of being stormy and tempestuous, was calm and without a ripple. There were hermits without any huts; there were priests but no altar; in the banquet scene Attila gave a banquet without any lights… and when the storm came the sky remained serene and limpid, as on the most beautiful spring day. Everyone (aloud and in their hearts) cursed Merelli for having treated *Attila* so badly. After the performance, all those going home past the Maestro's windows shouted: 'Viva Verdi! Eviva il Maestro!' It was a spectacle that made one simply overjoyed!

But Verdi himself, though of course delighted with the audience reception, was the very opposite of overjoyed.

VERDI: I had had more than enough examples to persuade me that here, in my own country, they didn't know how, didn't apparently *want*, to put on operas (and especially *my* operas) as they should be put on. I will never forget the unspeakable manner in which *I Lombardi, Ernani, I due Foscari* and so on were also produced. And now, with *Attila*, I had another example before my eyes. I had to ask myself whether, in spite of a good company of singers, this opera could possibly have been staged *worse* than it was on this occasion.

Verdi was given to depression at the best of times, but as the years went on he increasingly felt a genuine abhorrence of the career he'd chosen. As late as 1858, by which time he was a world-famous celebrity and had behind him several of the most popular operas ever written, he returned to his country retreat, after winning a suit to withdraw an opera from Naples, and, figuratively speaking, collapsed in a heap.

VERDI: Ah, at last I am here again. And after the uproar of Naples, this deep silence is even dearer to me than before. It may not be possible to find a place less lovely than this, but on the other hand, it would be impossible for me to find a place where I can live more freely than I do here; what's more, this silence leaves me time to think: and how lovely it is not even to see uniforms, of any colour!… And yet the truth is that ever since the success of *Nabucco,* I have never been granted so much as an hour of peace.

And now came the famous line,

VERDI: Sixteen years in the galleys!

But the fact is that he had largely himself to blame. By his own choice, he'd often put the highest ideals of art on the back burner, so to speak, and gone for the option of quick-fix popularity – which, of course, went hand in hand with a very sizeable income. Perhaps because of his poor origins he had a very keen appreciation of money and became an

astute and tough-minded businessman, who was fully a match for any impresario or publisher.

But it hadn't all been pot-boilers, and even of those that were, virtually all contain at least some music of real distinction, and in several cases a lot of it. The most interesting opera of these years, though, was the exact opposite of a pot-boiler. In 1847 Verdi completed his quite extraordinary recreation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth.* As we'll see in a moment, this was an opera like no other. It didn't score a great success in Verdi's lifetime, but once again he touched the nerve of Italian nationalism with a chorus of the dispossessed. This time it was Scottish exiles, not Hebrew slaves, but the message got through just the same, though the chorus never took on the anthem-like status of its predecessor.

12 **Macbeth: Chorus of the Scottish Exiles 'Patria oppressa!'**

13 The 'Chorus of the Scottish Exiles' from *Macbeth.*
Macbeth was a revolutionary opera – not politically but musically. Coming in the middle of a long string of hits, it surprised, even shocked some of Verdi's greatest fans. Because here, far from pandering to popular taste, he rebelled wholesale against traditions which had held sway in Italy long after they'd been abandoned in Germany and elsewhere. Not to put too fine a point on it, the success of an opera in Italy up to that time had been almost entirely based on the opportunities it gave the singers to display the beauty of their voices and the virtuosity of their technique. Dramatic effect, psychological development, depth of character, all the things that made the operas of Gluck, Mozart, Weber, Beethoven, and Wagner so great, counted for next to nothing. In fact they were basically ignored altogether. So it was absolutely necessary that Verdi left his cast of *Macbeth* in no doubt of the revolution they were helping to perpetrate. As he wrote at the time:

VERDI: This is a drama that has nothing in common in with the others, and we must all make every effort to render it in the most original possible manner.

And to the man who was to sing the title role:

VERDI: I shall never cease to recommend to you the closest study of the words and the dramatic situation. The music can look after itself. *In short, I would rather you served the poet better than the composer.*

How many composers have ever written that?!

The full extent of Verdi's revolutionary thinking, though, is spelled out, almost word for word, in a famous letter where he discusses a certain famous singer's lack of suitability for the role of Lady Macbeth – a letter which to many people, raised in the mellifluously 'beautiful' tradition of *bel canto*, as enshrined in the operas of Bellini and Donizetti, amounted to little less than heresy.

VERDI: I am given to understand that Mme Tadolini is to sing Lady Macbeth. I am frankly astonished that she should have undertaken this role. It is well known that I admire Mme Tadolini greatly. She knows this too. But in the interests of all, I must point out that her qualities are too great for this part – however absurd such a declaration may seem! Mme Tadolini is beautiful and of a virtuous appearance, whereas Lady Macbeth should be ugly and conspicuously evil. Mme Tadolini sings to perfection; ideally I should prefer not to have Lady Macbeth sing at all. Mme Tadolini has a wonderful voice, clear, caressing and strong. Lady Macbeth should sound hard, comfortless and dark. Mme Tadolini's voice is that of an angel, while Lady Macbeth's should be the voice of a demon.

But it soon looked as if *Macbeth* had been a freak, a one-off experiment which Verdi must have decided not to pursue any further. The next few operas he wrote gave hardly any hint, if hint at all, of the revolutionary genius behind *Macbeth*. And for the most part, his audiences were probably just as glad. They preferred his less adventurous works, and reserved their greatest applause, in general, for his more conventional operas.

In the same year as that first production of *Macbeth*, Verdi travelled to London, where like any good Italian he deplored the weather, but was bowled over by the sheer

size and bustle of the city. It was there that he completed his next opera, *I masnadieri*, and oversaw its production at Her Majesty's Theatre in July. But even though the cast included the near-legendary Jenny Lind (known as 'the Swedish Nightingale'), the audience gave it a polite but far from rapturous reception, and generally speaking it fared little better anywhere else. All that really survives from it in the modern repertory is the overture, which proves, if proof were needed, that Verdi didn't need the human voice in order for his music to sing.

14 **Overture to 'I masnadieri'**

15 By the time of *I masnadieri* Verdi could command almost any terms he liked. Almost. When he was asked to take over the direction of Her Majesty's Theatre in London and write three new operas at the rate of one a year, he asked such a colossal fee, buttressed by a further demand for a house in the country and his own private carriage, that the management had no choice but to postpone further negotiations indefinitely.

From London Verdi travelled to Paris, and the attitude expressed in a letter to Giuseppina Strepponi just before he left is quite characteristic.

VERDI: I look forward to going to Paris. It has no particular appeal for me in itself, but I am sure to enjoy it there because I shall be able to live as I like. It's a great joy to be able to do as one pleases!! When I think that I shall be there for several weeks, without being involved in any musical business, without hearing a word about music (you can be sure I shall send all publishers and impresarios packing), ah! I could almost swoon with relief.

In Paris, where he'd hoped to put aside all thoughts of composition, and to rest after the exertions of *I masnadieri*, he was commissioned to overhaul, and adapt to the Parisian taste, an earlier opera, *I Lombardi*, under the new title of *Jérusalem*. It says something both about Verdi's business sense and the state of his reputation at the time that he not only made the required alterations and additions but contrived to be paid as much as he would have been for a completely new opera. Not only that, he even managed to sell the

opera all over again, under its new title, to his publisher Ricordi. But he'd struck lucky with *I Lombardi* from the beginning. Following on from the success of *Nabucco*, his original contract for *I Lombardi* simply left a blank space where the fee was to be written and he was invited to fill it in as he saw fit.

Once he'd arrived in Paris, though, Verdi began almost immediately to wish he were somewhere else. As *he* knew as well as anyone, he was a hard man to please.

VERDI: I am always the same. Forever discontented – and with everything. When fortune is with me I want it against me; when it is against me I crave its favour; In Milan I want to be in Paris; now that I am in Paris I would like to be... Where? I don't know... on the moon. For the rest I enjoy here the kind of personal liberty I have always sought yet have never previously been able to achieve. I visit nobody, I receive no-one, nobody knows me and I haven't the annoyance of being pointed at, as in Italian cities. I am healthy; write a lot; my affairs go well; indeed everything goes well except my head, which I always hope will change – but it never does.

With his heart it was a different matter. His friendship with Strepponi had grown steadily more intimate over the ten years they'd known each other, and now, in Paris, where Strepponi had made her home, it blossomed into a fully fledged affair. They began regularly to appear in public together, and entertained prominent people in the evenings as a couple. An early visitor was Antonio Barezzi, Verdi's father-in-law, who was charmed by Strepponi and very happy for Verdi.

16 Verdi was still in Paris in February 1848 when the city was convulsed by the revolution which dethroned Louis-Philippe and re-established France as a republic. But he seemed curiously unaffected. Early in March, he wrote to Strepponi's namesake, his great friend Giuseppina Appiani:

VERDI: You will know all about events in Paris: since the 24th of February nothing has happened. The procession accompanying the dead to the funerary

column of the Bastille was imposing, magnificent, and in spite of there being no troops or police to keep order there was no hint of disturbance. The grand National Assembly will meet on the 20th of April to decide on the next government**…** I can hardly conceal the fact that I am having a very good time, and there has been nothing so far to disturb my sleep. I do nothing, to speak of; I go out for walks; I hear so much nonsense that I wish to hear no more; I buy about twenty newspapers a day (not because I want to read them, of course, but to avoid persecution by the vendors: when they see a bundle of papers in my hand no one thinks to burden me with others, and I laugh and laugh and laugh. Unless some vital development calls me home to Italy I shall stay here until the end of April to see the National Assembly.

Though Appiani, a former countess, was a close friend, Verdi makes no mention of Strepponi, who was undoubtedly the chief reason for his great happiness. But it was early days yet, as they say, and in any case, Verdi habitually avoided talking about his private life.

The Paris uprising of 1848 triggered a whole wave of revolutions which were to shake much of Europe to its foundations in the year that followed. Among these, only a month later, came the now legendary 'Five Days' in which the occupying Austrians were thrown out of Milan, and a mere four days after that, Venice, too, was declared a republic. Italians everywhere were jubilant, Verdi prominent among them. In April he wrote to librettist and great friend Francesco Piave, whom he now addressed as 'Citizen Piave',

VERDI: How could I possibly wish to remain in Paris, on hearing of revolution in Milan! I departed the moment I heard the news, but was only able to see these stupendous barricades. Oh, Honour to these brave men!! Honour to all Italy, which has at this moment recaptured is true greatness! Be convinced of it – the hour of her liberation has arrived! The people will it, and when the people speak with one voice, no absolute power can resist. Let them do as they please, intrigue however they like, those who want to impose themselves by main force will

never succeed in cheating the people of their rights. Yes, yes, in a few more years, perhaps only a few more months, Italy will be free, united and a republic.

But when it came to Piave's apparent query about Verdi's current compositional activities, this was swept aside with glorious vigour.

VERDI: Music? You speak to me of music?!! What *can* you be thinking of? Do you imagine for one second that I wish to occupy myself now with notes, with sounds? The only kind of music which should please the ears of good Italians at this moment is the music of guns! I wouldn't write a note for all the gold in the world: how remorseful I should feel for using up music paper, which is so useful for making cartridges. Ah my brave Piave, and *all* brave Venetians, banish every petty municipal idea from your heads! If we can all clasp hands as brothers, Italy will yet become the first nation of the world!!!

In the meantime the wave of revolutions cast a strange pall over much of Europe, Italy of course very much included. The mood in Milan as autumn hove into view was far from jubilant, as Verdi learned from the bass Carlo Cambiaggio in August 1848.

CAMBIAGGIO: Milan has become a monastery, or rather, one seems to be in the country, for there is no-one to be seen except the soldiers, who make a hellish noise, dragging their sabres along the ground. The day before yesterday they shot a young man of twenty-five because they found he was wearing a dagger; and today, so we hear, they are going to shoot another. In order to avoid being shot, I don't even carry a cane, and make sure I get home by eight o'clock.

And a couple of weeks later, again from Cambiaggio:

CAMBIAGGIO: Milan overflows with soldiery. All the houses and *palazzi* are full of them. They cook their rations in magnificent apartments and gilded

salons. The famous Casino de' Nobili, all the Archbishop's Palace and many churches are full of Croats and other such insects… At Monza they shot a man and his son just because they found a wretched, useless fowling-piece buried in his garden – and it didn't even belong to him. Every day there are new taxes announced… If you could be here during the evening you wouldn't even believe you were in Milan; in fifteen minutes or less you would encounter twenty patrols, in war-formation, with their sentries, vanguards and rearguards. There is much talk; but what's certain is that the mayor hasn't the means to go on. Meanwhile the theatre flourishes, Merelli laughs and the military carouse.

Needless to say, the effects of all these revolutions were felt at every level of society and in every sphere of activity. As Strepponi observed, from her vantage point in Paris,

STREPPONI: You envy me because I am out of Italy? You are wrong, for things here are the same. Politics is all you hear of. Theatres are closing, the artists under annual contract, even those at the Grand Opera, have either been put on half-pay, or their salaries have been greatly reduced. And as for singing and piano teachers, well, they have all the time in the world to take as many walks as they please. For me, the winter began quite well, but then in February the revolution cut short every musical resource. I haven't left Paris because, having set up house here, I should have lost much in selling my furniture at a time when money is short, and I should have incurred useless expenses in travelling. And anyway, where should I go?

Verdi himself returned home briefly, before returning to Strepponi in Paris and starting work on a new opera to celebrate and enhance the patriotic flame rekindled by this revolutionary wave. By the time the work was finished, though, the euphoria had died, most of the successes had been reversed, and Italian spirits were once again badly in need of a lift. *La battaglia di Legnano*, produced in Rome in January 1849, may not have done the whole trick (no piece of music could do that) but its reception was the most rapturous Verdi had yet experienced. This, it has to be said, was partly because the proclamation of

the Roman Republic had taken place less than two weeks earlier, raising Italian spirits once again, but with the usual let-down afterwards, as one false dawn followed another. The independence of Italy did come to pass, well within Verdi's lifetime, as we'll see, but *La battaglia di Legnano* – 'The *Battle* of Legnano' in English – marked both the summation and the end of Verdi's career as a specifically nationalistic, one might almost say *political* composer. Musical propaganda this may be, with all its specific references to Austrian domination, the need for sacrifice and unity, the treachery of all who fail to rally to the cause, and the glorification of heroism; but its sincerity and passion are genuine almost to a fault. During its first triumphant run, the whole of the fourth act had to be repeated at every performance, by popular demand. And the overture was a guaranteed winner at orchestral concerts.

17 **Overture to 'La battaglia di Legnano'**

CD 2

1 In August 1849 there were pressing reasons to leave Paris, the chief of which was a cholera epidemic. Verdi returned to Busseto, where he'd bought a house – the grandly named Palazzo Dordoni, on the main street – and was soon joined there by Giuseppina (or Peppina, as he now regularly called her).

Not long after her arrival, Verdi received from Piave the completed text for their next opera, *Rigoletto* (or *La maledizione* as it was first called). This was a time when official, government censorship was rife, not only in Italy but pretty well right across Europe. In many cities the embers of the previous year's revolutions still glowed, and the powers that be were understandably nervous. Verdi and Piave had recently suffered massive mutilation, figuratively speaking, over their opera *Stiffelio*, but they'd been assured on good authority that there should be no problem with *Rigoletto*. Well, it was too good to be true. Having submitted it to the censors as a pure formality, they were then informed that the whole subject had been strictly forbidden, and that no amendments would alter the case. The censor, in his official report, noted:

CENSOR: It is greatly regrettable that the poet Piave and the celebrated Maestro Verdi have been unable to find some other theme on which to exercise their gifts than one of such repulsive immorality and obscene triviality as the subject of their latest libretto.

But Verdi and Piave fought back. Amendment of the text had been officially ruled out, but Piave, with the surprising assistance of the very official who'd signed the censor's report, nevertheless set about changing the text to make it more palatable to the authorities. When Verdi saw the amended version he hit the ceiling.

VERDI: I had already made it as plain as day that even if they showered me with gold, or threw me in prison, I absolutely could not, and would not, set a new libretto.

Nevertheless, with the revised version in his hand, he couldn't resist taking a cursory glance at it. It didn't improve his mood. One needn't have any knowledge of the plot to sense the burning indignation and the incorruptible artistic integrity, not to mention the depth of dramatic insight, in his response.

VERDI: I have not yet had the time to read it through with my customary care, but I have seen enough to realise that it now lacks both character and importance – and that the most important scenes have been rendered very, very cold. The old man's curse, so original and sublime in the original, is here made ridiculous, because the very motive which drives him to utter the curse has been vitiated, and because he is no longer a subject who speaks so boldly to the king. And without this curse, the drama lacks both meaning and purpose. To take a few examples: the Duke absolutely must be a libertine; without that there can be no justification for Rigoletto's fear that his daughter might come out of her hiding place… In the last act, why ever should the Duke go to a remote tavern without an invitation and without an appointment? Nor can I understand why the sack should have been taken out. How does the sack concern the police? Are they

afraid it won't be effective? But might I be permitted to ask why they suppose themselves to be better judges in the matter than I?… I note finally that we are to avoid making Rigoletto ugly and hunchbacked. Putting on the stage a character who is grossly deformed and absurd but inwardly passionate and full of love is precisely what I feel to be so fine. I chose this subject precisely for those qualities, those original traits, and if they are taken away I can no longer write music for it. If you tell me that my music can stay the same even with this drama I reply that I don't understand this kind of reasoning, and I must say frankly that whether my music is good or bad I don't write it at random, but I always try to give it a definite character.

In the event, the authorities accepted a compromise and on the 11th of March 1851 *Rigoletto* was finally produced in Venice. It was by no means the first of Verdi's operas to enjoy a tremendous success at its first performance, as we've seen, but it's the first of his sixteen operas so far to have found a permanent place in the mainstream operatic repertoire. Its success was instantaneous and it's never come close to falling out of public favour.

2 **Rigoletto: 'La donna e mobile'**

3 That aria is one of the most famous ever written, and it topped the barrel-organ hit list all over Italy, but while it was a natural-born crowd-pleaser it doesn't begin to convey why *Rigoletto* is a great opera. It's a grand tune, and it does its job in the opera alright, but what sets *Rigoletto* apart from most of Verdi's earlier operas is its combination of compositional skill and psychological insight. Nowhere is this more stunningly displayed than in the Act III quartet which encompasses four different moods and characters within a single ensemble of less than five minutes' duration. Here we have, combined, the ardour of the Duke, the coquettishness of one woman, the grief of another, and the grim menace of the hunchbacked court jester, Rigoletto himself:

4 **Rigoletto: 'Bella figlia dell'amore'**

5 The quartet 'Bella figlia dell'amore' from Act III of *Rigoletto*.

Verdi was now enjoying a level of popularity and artistic fertility the like of which he'd never known. Strepponi, on the other hand, was having a difficult time of it. Her presence in Verdi's house, unmarried but conspicuously in a wife-like role, had aroused everything from idle (and often malicious) gossip to powerful displays of moral indignation amongst Verdi's enemies and relations alike. After all, his first, his only, wife, had been a much-loved local girl, known to the whole community – and here was her now famous widower, openly living in sin with a woman of dubious morality (Giuseppina had had a well-publicised affair with the impresario Merelli, who'd given Verdi his first big chance, remember, and coaxed him into composing *Nabucco*. She also had two illegitimate children – but not, as widely believed, by Merelli). Although she had herself been famous, or more probably *because* of it, Verdi seldom allowed her, at this stage, to accompany him when he went to supervise his operas. In Busseto, she was cold-shouldered on the street, some crossing to the other side to avoid meeting her, and no-one would sit near her in church. Interestingly, Barezzi took no part in this, at least to begin with, witness his accompanying Verdi to Naples in October for the production of *Luisa Miller*. In time, though, the strain inevitably began to tell, and no wonder. More than two years later, in response to a letter from Barezzi which has disappeared, Verdi leaves no doubt that the attitude and behaviour of the townspeople of Busseto had not improved. Nor, understandably, had his to them.

VERDI: Dearest father-in-law, I never expected to receive from you such a cold letter, containing, unless I have misunderstood them, some very pointed remarks. Indeed if the signature at the bottom had been any but yours, my benefactor, I should either have replied very sharply or not at all. As it is, I can only try, to the best of my abilities, to demonstrate to you that I am undeserving of any kind of reproach. I cannot believe that you would have written me a letter, of your own accord, which you knew would cause me distress. But you live in a town where people have the odious habit of prying into other people's affairs and of disapproving of all that fails to conform to their own way of thinking. For

myself, I never interfere in other people's business, unless I am specifically asked to, and I expect others not to interfere in mine. I am surely entitled in my own country to the same freedom of action accorded to those even in less civilised places. If I choose to live in isolation, where is the harm in that? Am I obliged to pay calls on titled people? To take part in the festivities of others? If I administer my farmlands because it pleases and amuses me, I ask again: where is the harm in this? No-one is any the worse for it.

I turn now to the sentence in your letter where you say: 'I well know that I am not the man for serious charges, because my time is over, but I am still capable of little things'. If this is a reproach because I have not entrusted you with my affairs during my absence, I ask you: how could I possibly be so inconsiderate as to lay such a heavy burden on you, who never set foot in your own fields, because the demands of your own business already weigh too heavily on you?

I bared to you my opinions, my actions, my wishes, my public life. To you, I would almost say, I have no objection to raising the curtain that veils the mysteries contained within four walls, and telling you about my private life. I have nothing to hide. In my house there lives a lady, free and independent, a lover like myself of solitude, and wealthy enough to be free of want. We are neither of us accountable to anyone for our actions. And in any case, who knows what relationship exists between us? What affairs? What ties? What claims I have on her, and she on me? Who can say whether or not she is my wife? And if she is, who can say what reasons there may be for not making the fact public? What right has anyone to ostracise us? One thing I will say: in my house she is entitled to more respect than even I myself; and no one is allowed to forget that for one second. And finally, on account both of her conduct and her character she has every right to the consideration that she so unfailingly shows to others.

But relief, though not an end to the tension, had come through Strepponi's own initiative.

STREPPONI: Many years ago (I dare not say how many), since I loved the country so much, I insisted to Verdi that it would do him good to leave Paris, and to enjoy, under an open sky, those restorative baths of fresh air and sunshine which both strengthen the body and bring peace to the mind. Verdi, who then had almost a horror of country life, consented finally to take a small house not far from Paris. The pleasures of this new way of life came to him like a revelation! He surrendered to it so entirely, came, indeed, to love it with such passion, that I found myself surpassed, my prayers only too well answered in this new cult of woodland gods.

This, though, was just a beginning – the seed from which a whole new dimension of Verdi's life was to develop.

6 STREPPONI: In Busseto one day, Verdi purchased the nearby estate of Sant' Agata, a large house with extensive farmland, and it fell to me (I had already furnished a house at Milan and another in Paris) to organise a *pied-à-terre* in the new possessions of our illustrious professor. With limitless pleasure, we began to plant a garden. To start with, it was called 'Peppina's Garden'. But as it grew larger and larger it became *his* garden, and in this garden *of his* he now reigns like a tsar, so that poor Peppina is now reduced to a few feet of ground, into which, by mutual agreement, he has no right to poke his nose. I cannot in all honesty say that he always respects this arrangement, but I have found a means of curbing his ardour by threatening to plant cabbages instead of flowers. This garden, which grew ever larger and more beautiful, thus called for a grander, less *rustic* dwelling. So Verdi turned architect, and during the rebuilding of the house, beds, wardrobes, *all* the furniture fairly danced from room to room. Apart from the kitchen, the cellar and the stables, we have by now slept and taken our meals in every corner of the house. When the fate of Italy hung in the balance, the most distinguished visitors came to Sant' Agata and had the honour of dining in a kind of ante-room or passageway, while whole families of swallows flew in and out through a grating, bringing food to their young. When God willed it, the house

was finished, and I can affirm that Verdi directed the whole operation beautifully – better perhaps, even than a real architect.

The relief felt by the couple as they moved in, finally removed from their prominent position on Busseto's main street, can only be guessed at, but the tone and content of their letters show them delighting in their isolation from the outside world in general, and from Busseto in particular. Verdi had by now taken such a dislike to the town that for a long time he refused so much as to set foot in it. Apart from the time he gave to composition, Sant' Agata now became his life. As Giuseppina reported,

STREPPONI: Verdi is in the garden all the time he is not sleeping or eating. He has already made the necessary arrangements for the little island in the pond to take another shape. Today the plants arrive from Bordin and if by mischance the moon shines tonight we shall have, until God knows when, to put as many of them as possible in their places, seeing that tomorrow is a holiday, when it'll be impossible to get any work done. I suspect he will probably end up as a gardener, for the greater glory of the art of music, and so be it!

And as for Strepponi herself, she was enchanted, as she made plain to Verdi's French publisher Leon Escudier:

STREPPONI: I shall only speak in passing of my nightingales (I don't want to make you jealous!). They are in my room and sing all the time as though it were May. But my peacocks (I have eight of them!!) are miserable! They like to sleep in the open but the incessant rain we've been having soaks them to the marrow. My dear white Loulou (a mere puppy when you saw him) is now the most beautiful dog you can imagine, and all the world has to obey him. Verdi has the patience to walk around with the dog under his cloak, in such a way that just his nose pokes outside, so he can breathe.

But going through Verdi's head as he walked around with the dog was the music of an opera which was to hold its own for many years as the most popular in the entire repertoire, *Il Trovatore* – home, among other things, of the famous 'Soldier's Chorus'.

7 **Il Trovatore: Soldiers' Chorus 'Or co'dadi, ma fra poco'**

8 'The Soldier's Chorus' from *Il Trovatore*, written not long after Verdi and Strepponi moved into their home at Sant' Agata.

It's in Strepponi's letters from Sant' Agata, probably more than in Verdi's own, that we get the most vivid portrait of the man, *and* of her entirely positive influence on him. She played a vital role in shaping his perspectives, helping him, as we've seen, to relax a little and enjoy himself – not always an easy task. He was given, as we've also seen, to spells of deep depression, sometimes even in the face of his greatest successes. Her devotion to him was unswerving, but like most geniuses he was not an easy man to live with. As Strepponi's private letter-book makes plain, the so-called 'Bear of Busseto' more than lived up to his nickname.

STREPPONI: To occupy oneself exclusively with one man may be admirable in theory; in practice it's a big mistake. I try to cheer Verdi up about his various indispositions, which he tends to regard, because of his nerves and imagination, as more serious than they really are. He complains that I don't believe him, I laugh and so on, and he blames me for that. It's true that he is subject to prolonged sore throats and intestinal upsets, and the restlessness, the running about, the hard work – plus his natural restiveness – are causing some abdominal inflammation. He enters my room repeatedly, without staying ten minutes in peace. Yesterday he came in, and then got up, as usual (especially recently), almost as soon as he'd sat down. 'Where are you off to?' I asked. 'Upstairs,' he says. Since he doesn't often do this, I replied: 'What for?' 'To look for Plato.' 'Oh! don't you remember? It's in the cupboard in the dining-room.' It seems to me that there was nothing at all natural about these questions and answers, and I was thinking all the time of not seeing him stay quiet, as he needs to do, and of saving

him unnecessary exertions. I wish I hadn't said it. It was a serious business, quite premeditated on my part, and almost an abuse of power!

And later:

STREPPONI: Verdi is so worked up against the servants and against me that I don't know how I can speak without offending him! Alas I have no idea how things will turn out. He just becomes increasingly agitated and angry. Oh, to possess such exalted qualities as he has and yet to have such a harsh and difficult character! The copies of letters contained in this book prove that he sometimes has confidence in my character and credits me at least with a bit of sense… Yet sometimes, when I happen to recognise the handwriting of a friend in the address of a letter, and ask: 'How is he?' this seems to irritate him terribly and he accuses me of poking my nose where it doesn't belong!

July 2. This evening, another row, this time about an open window and the fact that I tried to calm him down! He got into a rage, threatening to dismiss all the servants, and saying that I side with them when they don't do what they're supposed to, rather than supporting him when he makes the most just observations. But my God! In these moods he sees servants' failings through a magnifying glass, and besides, the poor things need *somebody* to look after their interests a bit, because they are poor and, in the generally corrupt mass of servants, not bad people. I pray to God that he may calm down, for I suffer very severely from these bouts, and too easily lose my head.

July 3. I have just learned that Marcellino, on his last visit to Busetto, was in floods of tears because he expects any day to be dismissed, since Verdi does nothing but express his displeasure; Marcellino protests that he is doing all he can, that his failings are the result only of excessive nervousness; that he loves his master and his mistress, and that if he were let go, he would leave town altogether in desperation.

Verdi's rate of production slowed after his move to Sant' Agata, but not immediately. Work on *Il Trovatore* proceeded very quickly, it's first performance was a stupendous hit, and it's been part of the central repertoire ever since (this despite a terrible libretto and a plot which is so complicated that it becomes almost unintelligible). It's really an opera that succeeds on the strength and drive of its music alone. As far as dramatic truth and psychological integrity are concerned, it's something of a backwards step – it's predominantly a singer's opera, with very little of *Macbeth*'s or *Rigoletto*'s originality and sophistication. But these are dramaturgical quibbles which have never bothered the public in the slightest. With music like this, most opera fans reckon, who cares about the plot?

7 **Il Trovatore: 'Di tale amor che dirsi'**

8 While he was still putting the finishing touches to *Il Trovatore*, Verdi had already started on his next opera, which was to complete a hat trick of smash hits without parallel in the history of opera. First *Rigoletto*, then *Il Trovatore,* and finally *La Traviata* – of which more in a moment. After that great burst of quick-fire inspiration, his rate of production slowed to an average of one opera every two years. Apart from anything else, he now had the welcome distractions of his life with Strepponi at Sant' Agata. Or perhaps I should say 'the *mostly* welcome distractions'. A Verdi without stresses and strains and grumbles would hardly have been Verdi at all.

It would be nice to report that the move to Sant' Agata and the tremendous success of both *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore* brought out the best in him, but it would only partially be true. Verdi the national institution and newly prosperous landowner seems for a while to have forgotten his self-styled 'peasant' origins and his championship of the underdog. A man who addresses his servants and employees in *this* fashion is hard to describe as lovable:

VERDI: I depart for Paris tomorrow evening and in the hope that for once I may be able to make myself understood and obeyed, I repeat to you, yet again, your instructions.

1. In addition to your general inspection, you will keep watch over the horses and the coachman, who does not inspire my confidence when it comes to orders. He is to exercise the horses every two days, and must not venture into Busseto.

2. You will tell Guerino that in handing over the key to the engine he was doing wrong, and that he must now clean it and lock it up until I give him permission to do otherwise.

3. You will repeat to the gardener what I said to him. The garden is to be closed: no one shall enter, nor must anyone in the house be allowed to go out, apart from the coachman, and then only for the short time required for exercising the horses. If anyone goes out, he can stay out forever. Let there be no misunderstanding: from this time forward I intend to be master in my own house.

More distressing than his conduct as an employer is Verdi's treatment of his parents, to whom he'd hardly ever been particularly close at the best of times. Relations between parents and offspring are inevitably complex, and it's unfair, in any case, to pass unforgiving judgements on other people's families, especially when armed with inadequate knowledge, but at the very least Verdi's relations with his parents make for depressing reading. Like many prosperous sons of impoverished parents, and in keeping with a basically generous and often noble character, he'd looked after their material needs, and had even provided them with a house on his lands. But for all that he talked of being a peasant he lived in another world, beyond their understanding, and, apparently with most of Busseto, they regarded Strepponi as a scarlet woman, and his cohabitation with her as a sin. And Verdi rubbed salt in the wound by refusing to say whether they were married or not. Anyway, one thing led to another, and in January 1851 he decided to cut himself off from them altogether – to the extent of hiring a lawyer to draft a legal document of separation. He ordered his parents out of their house and off his land, and they communicated with each other, if at all, only through an intermediary – in this case

the lawyer Balestra. Typical of this unhappy situation is a letter written to Balestra in late January.

VERDI: I have it on good authority that my father is going around peddling the fiction that our differences have been settled in one of the two following ways: that I would grant to him the administration of my properties, or that I would lease them to him. I do not believe that there has been any misunderstanding between you and me, sir, nor can I believe that you have proposed to him anything of the kind; nevertheless, I repeat to you that I will never agree to either of these proposals. It is my intention to be separated from my father both in my residence and my business. To sum up, I can only repeat what I told you yesterday in person: *as far as the world is concerned, Carlo Verdi must be seen to be one thing, and Giuseppe Verdi another.*

The situation worsened some ten days later. So Balestra got another letter:

VERDI: A man from Roncole called Piga sent a message to me about a debt of twenty-two francs that my father owes him. I told him to give you the details, and that if the debt is legal, I shall pay. So I entreat you to investigate the matter. I ask, too, that you pay my father whatever you think right for February. He must resign himself to one of the proposals on offer from me, because if things are not settled once and for all when I return from Venice, I shall choose something that will be to his disadvantage. He must be convinced that my decision to separate myself from him is immutable, because it was made after the most serious and thoughtful consideration.

By the 5th of February another serious problem had come up – and once again it was up to Balestra to pick up the pieces.

VERDI: There has been some misunderstanding! I let my mother have the rights to the chicken-yard while we were together; but now that we are separated it is

perfectly obvious that this right should revert to me. Around a fortnight ago the Brunelli woman enquired as to where she should bring the produce from the chicken-yard. I told her '*To the house in Busseto, of course'.* I issued this order not because I am in any way tight-fisted, but because I do not wish to let my parents have any rights whatever, either small or large. Anyway, what do they lack? Isn't what I've given them already enough? And you can tell my father too, in no uncertain terms, that I am sick to death of the scenes that he makes; his conduct will only lead to a course of action that will be ruinous for us both. I will sell everything, at whatever price, and will leave this place forever! Signor Doctor, I deeply regret that you have to deal with so painful and shameful a matter, but in no way am I to blame.

In the midst of this unfortunate episode, Verdi's mother died. Unexpectedly, Verdi appeared to collapse with grief, which must have had more than a few undercurrents of guilt. He sobbed and raved uncontrollably, as reported by the dependable Muzio.

MUZIO: His grief is great beyond description. Peppina, too, is suffering, from watching him weep, and the sad task of arranging for the funeral, priests, and so on has fallen to me. I thought I had convinced him to leave home and come to Milan. However, he has evidently reconsidered and now refuses to leave his house.

But he recovered in plenty of time for the first production of *La Traviata*, in Venice, a couple of months later. On this occasion, though, there was no hint of a runaway success. On the contrary, it was a disaster – one of the biggest flops in his career. But to judge from an entry in his diary, he took it very philosophically.

VERDI: *La Traviata*, last night, a total *fiasco.* Is it my fault or the singers'? Time will tell.

And so it did. When the work was produced again, a little over a year later – also in Venice, but at a different theatre – it got a tremendous reception. Soon, like *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore*, it was being performed all over the so-called civilised world, as it still is.

9 **La Traviata: 'Dite alla giovine'**

10 Violetta's aria 'Dite alla giovine' from *La Traviata.*

Many people have suspected a certain parallel between the main character of *La Traviata*, the consumptive courtesan Violetta, and Giuseppina Strepponi. Strepponi was neither consumptive nor a courtesan, nor anything like one, but like Violetta, she was a woman with a past, as the phrase has it, and there's good reason to believe from her letters that the reason she and Verdi were still unmarried after six years of living together – and indeed remained so for another six – had more to do with feelings of unworthiness on her part than with any reluctance on his.

STREPPONI: We will not have children (since God perhaps is punishing me by refusing me any legitimate joy before I die!) But since you can have none by me, I hope you will inflict no further suffering on me by conceiving any with another woman. Consider: now, *without* children, you have at your disposal more than enough money to see to your needs and still have room for luxury. Think how much we love being in the country, where we spend so little and find such pleasure. When I reflect that at Sant' Agata there are the dear rumps of our horses, who so spiritedly draw your little carriage and who cost us so little, when I think of my beloved pets, who gaze up at me with such affection and need – they too cost little and amuse me so much – and of our flowers, and that little bit of a garden which we enjoy together as if it were Eden itself, I ask myself then whether life can ever have given us so many pleasures, and if two or three months a year in some accursed *city* are not more than we need to make us feverish with longing for the Country.

O my dearest Verdi, I am not worthy of you. Your love for me is charity itself, balm to a heart so often sad beneath the appearance of gaiety. Go on

loving me, my dearest, love me also after my death, so that I may present myself
to Divine Providence enriched by your love and your prayers. O my Redeemer!

Wow! And what are we to make of that line, 'I hope you will inflict no further suffering on me by conceiving any with another woman'?   Verdi's relations with 'other women' are shrouded in mystery. Letters and reminiscences, by Verdi and others, give nothing more than hints here and there. But hints there are. In several letters to Piave in Venice, from 1844 to 1851, he makes almost coyly elusive references to a woman he describes only as an 'Angel'. In one of the earlier ones, he adds a little note at the end:

VERDI: Give my greetings to the Angel (you know who I mean!)

And at the time of his setting up home with Strepponi in Busseto, he faces the consequences of 'lowering a curtain' between them and the outside world by asking Piave, this time using the tantalisingly masculine coded reference 'Sior Toni':

VERDI: In your great generosity, would you be so kind as to deliver this letter to
'*Sior Toni*'. In the midst of a sea of miseries, the knowledge that this matter is
being kept the darkest secret brings me the most acute pleasure! I desire that this
mystery should continue! I beg you, I *implore* you, although I am sure there is
no need… Tell me, when do you see her?… and how do you speak to her?

Like Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady of the Sonnets', her identity has never been discovered, and in any case, we never hear of her again.

. . . . .

11 Six months or so after the fiasco of *La Traviata* in Venice, Verdi returned to France to write a work commissioned by the Paris Opéra for the following season. *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (The Sicilian Vespers).

The Sicilian Vespers caused Verdi untold headaches, largely because of personal and legal wrangles with almost everyone concerned with it. Well, I say 'untold' – but in fact Verdi sounded off about it unrestrainedly in many of his letters at the time. The best

picture, though, of what he was up against comes in a report which was published in a Parisian musical journal at the time.

REPORTER: What has happened at the Opéra is probably unprecedented in the annals of this theatre. For more than three months, Verdi has been directing rehearsals of his opera here, calmly and with the most admirable zeal. Recently, however, the orchestra, or rather a single section of it, discovered a way gratuitously to insult this great maestro. On Thursday last, Verdi deemed it prudent to call a rehearsal of the whole company; previously he had had only two orchestral rehearsals, which, it should be noted, seems to us a rather modest number. During the first piece, the Maestro sensed a certain antagonism on the part of the strings; though he spoke courteously to them, they very pointedly paid him no attention. The second time, the dynamics for which Verdi had asked were so much exaggerated as to put the players' intentions in no doubt. The Maestro went over to one of these men, remarking, without a tinge of bitterness, that he could not understand the reason for the orchestra's unwillingness to co-operate. 'This rehearsal,' the violinist replied, 'is quite pointless. We could have done perfectly well without it.' 'But,' rejoined Verdi, 'if I myself requested it, it was because I felt it was necessary.' 'Well, you see,' replied the artist in question, 'the problem is that each of us has to mind his own business'. 'Ah!' said Verdi, 'So you have your business! I thought your business was here; apparently I was mistaken.' Having said that, Verdi called for Dietsch, the orchestra's director, and explained his astonishment at the musicians' conduct. 'After such a display, which I feel is extremely unseemly,' he said, 'I have nothing else to do here, and shall therefore take my leave of you.' He fetched his hat and left, never to return.

Whatever the orchestra may have felt, there must have been others who realised not only that Verdi had been right, but that the work they were rehearsing contained some of the best and most subtly dramatic music he'd yet written. The great Act I duet 'Quando al mio sen per te parlava' embraces such a wide range of emotions that to summarise them

concisely would be almost impossible. But in any case, the music speaks so eloquently and masterfully for itself that it far transcends the details of the plot.

12 **I vespri siciliani: ‘Quando al mio sen per te parlava’**

13 Like most great artists, Verdi was a stickler for discipline (you don't become a great artist without it). On another occasion, this time only minutes before the final dress rehearsal of *Macbeth*, with the invited audience already settled in their seats, he called the two principal singers out into the foyer for one last run-through before the curtain went up. The soprano protested, quite reasonably, that it was too late and reminded him that she was already in costume. Verdi told her to put a cloak on over her dress and to hurry. This was too much for the lead male singer, Varesi. But for the rest of the story, we turn to the soprano Marianna Barbieri-Nini, who was there:

BARBIERI-NINI: Varesi, fed up with this extraordinary request, tried raising his voice a little, saying: 'For God's sake, we've already rehearsed it a hundred and fifty times!' And Verdi answered 'You won't be saying that in half an hour's time: it will be one hundred and fifty-one by then.' We were forced to obey the tyrant. I shall never forget the threatening looks Varesi shot at him. With his fist on the hilt of his sword, he looked as though he was about to slaughter Verdi, as he would later slaughter King Duncan. However, he yielded, and the one hundred and fifty-first rehearsal took place while the audience caused a veritable tumult in the theatre.

And we get a still better vignette of Verdi as conductor from another Parisian journal, *Le Figaro*, whose reporter, in this case, took the precaution of hiding in one of the boxes.

CRITIC: He listens with all his being, all the power of that iron character focused on one single thing. He hears twice as much, three times as much as others, questions everything, hears the faintest note – in even the heaviest score; he hears the chorus and the brasses together, gets up, leaps about, valiantly

encouraging his forces, and calling out, with that Italian accent that makes his voice so fascinating, ‘No! There is a rest there! Come on! Quick!’ People are singing downstage, but Verdi is talking to members of the chorus in the back: 'Look! Look! Can't you see? There is a mark over that note!' He returns to the front, beats the time, snaps his fingers; and that sharp noise, so quick, nervous, like the noise of castanets, can be heard right over the orchestra and chorus; it excites them, encourages them forward like the snapping of a whip. And then there are his hands, which he claps together; this man is music personified, fighting for his own ideals, pouring his genius into those men, those women, all present, searing them with his own flame, striking the stage floor with his heels, running upstage, quelling the choristers, drawing meaning from that chaos, out of which emerges a world of supreme order. Here we have a man, rich, honoured and glorious, who yet can expect from his art only fresh tribulations, fatigue, laurels won only with supreme effort, triumphs hard earned through disappointments, sleepless nights and rage. He has an income of 80,000 francs a year; his very name sends a message of freedom and courage to his country, a call to arms. In the theatre, too, he fights on, tenaciously, for something better. He carries his burdens like an athlete. When people speak of his celebrity, he protests, ‘I am just a peasant’. So be it. This is a peasant who wins battles and discovers new worlds.

The Sicilian Vespers was finally staged in June 1855. Among the critics in the audience was none other than Hector Berlioz.

BERLIOZ: Without detracting in any way from the value of *Il Trovatore* and Verdi's many other moving scores, one must admit that in this opera the penetrating intensity of the melodic expression, the sumptuous variety and wisdom of the instrumentation, the vastness, the poetic sonority of the ensemble pieces, the colourful warmth that shines everywhere, and that passionate but deliberate force that makes up one of the characteristic traits of Verdi's genius,

give the entire opera a greatness, a sovereign majesty more evident here than in any previous work by this composer.

Well, you could hardly ask for a better review than that, but Berlioz rarely spoke for the majority. *The Sicilian Vespers* scored only a moderate success and soon dropped out of the repertoire, though for a time its overture enjoyed an independent life in the concert hall – as from time to time it still does.

14 **Overture to 'I vespri siciliani'**

CD 3

1 Verdi was not a glutton for punishment but it sometimes seemed as though he was. The truth is that he was a man of principle who fought for his own rights with all the tenacity of a bulldog. Although he was by this time fed up with Paris, he stayed on for almost half a year after the opening of *The Sicilian Vespers*, in an attempt to stop the regular pirating of his works by the Théâtre Italien. He even brought a law suit against the Director, but the court ruled against him.

His troubles, though, were hardly confined to France. Two operas later, in 1858, he became embroiled in yet another tussle with the censors, this time in Naples over the work eventually known as *Un ballo in maschera* (A Masked Ball).

VERDI: I am in a real Hell. It is all but certain that the censors will veto the libretto. Yet what is there here that could undermine religion, politics or morals? I cannot understand this. But now, the subscribers will withhold two instalments (about 30,000 ducats, no small sum) and the government will not do *its* part. Undoubtedly the management will sue everyone, including me. I curse the very moment when I signed this contract! My peace of mind is shattered! And over what? This libretto is the most innocent thing on earth.

Despite threats of arrest and claims of huge damages on the part of the management, Verdi stubbornly refused to give in. Eventually the contract was cancelled, and a year later the opera was produced in Rome, though in this case there were wrangles with the *Papal* censors. It enjoyed instantaneous success, which was probably for reasons at least as much political as artistic, though the opera is one of Verdi's best.

2 **Un ballo in maschera: 'Ma se m'è forza perderti'**

3 Throughout Italy, especially after a celebrated speech by Victor Emmanuel, war between Austria and Piedmont was increasingly felt to be imminent. It was at about this time that Verdi's name took on a political significance which he can hardly have anticipated – not through any act on his part but because it was an acronym of 'Victor Emanuel, King of Italy': V.E.R.D.I – '**V**ittorio **E**mmanuele, **R**e **d'I**talia'. The cry 'Viva Verdi!' was now widely taken up by people with only the flimsiest interest in opera, if any interest at all.

Two months after the Roman production of *Un ballo in maschera*, Verdi and Giuseppina were finally married. On the same day, Austrian troops crossed the border of Piedmont. Thanks to a defensive alliance with Napoleon III, secured by Verdi's hero Camillo Benso di Cavour, the eventual saviour of Italy, they were driven out in a series of bloody battles. In June the Dukes of Parma and Modena fled their posts, and provisional regional governments were set up under the protection of Victor Emmanuel. With the establishment of a free and united Italy now looking assured, Verdi, like most Italians, was jubilant. But it was a false spring. Napoleon unexpectedly signed an independent armistice with Austria, Venice remained in Austrian hands, and disillusionment was rife.

VERDI: Today it is more fitting to send up a lament for the endless misfortunes of our country than to sing a hymn to glory. I read in a bulletin received on the twelfth of July: *'Peace has been made… Venice remains Austrian"*. Where, then, is Italy's independence, promised and coveted for so long? What!? So Venice is not Italian?! What a miserable outcome! So much blood shed for nothing! So many poor young people deluded! I write with a sense of the deepest outrage. Is

it not true that we can never expect anything from foreigners, no matter whence they come! I don't know. Perhaps I am wrong again. I hope so.

But his hopes were dashed. He was only too right. Small wonder that politics were to occupy Verdi more than music for some time to come.

In 1860 things were again looking up. A series of major victories under Garibaldi transformed the mood of Italians everywhere. When the Duchy of Parma elected to unite with Piedmont, Verdi was among those elected to carry the result to Victor Emmanuel at Turin. On the 5th of September he sent his formal letter of acceptance to Donnino Corbellini, the Podesta of Busseto.

VERDI: Illustrious Signor Podesta, for the honour that my countrymen confer upon me in nominating me as their representative, I am most deeply grateful. Indeed I am most flattered. My few talents, my studies, and my art do not perhaps make me ideally suited to such a role, but there may at least be value in the great love I bear for this, our noble and sorrowing country. In my name, and that of my fellow citizens, I shall proclaim *the fall of the Bourbon dynasty; annexation to the Piedmont; the Dictatorship of the illustrious Italian Luigi Carlo Farini.* All who feel Italian blood running in their veins must desire this strongly and constantly, for it is certain that in annexation to the Piedmont rests the future greatness and regeneration of this, our native land. Thus will the day dawn when we can say that we all of us belong to a great and noble Nation.

Cavour summoned the first national parliament, and insisted on Verdi's participation. Thus it was that the greatest Italian composer of modern times offered himself as member of parliament for the district of Borgo San Donnino, which included Busseto. But for all his patriotism, he was a reluctant politician.

VERDI: The fact is that I cannot and I do not wish to have a career in politics. Let me say for the hundredth time that if I am nominated, I will accept, but under protest; I will not do anything, I will not say a single word to get myself elected.

And of course he didn't have to. He was now (had been for some time) more than a man, an individual. He was a symbol. The proudest banner of the nationalist cause, surpassing in international stature and popularity even the most prominent Italian politicians, writers, and artists. True to his word, he accepted the nomination and was duly elected. In the parliament he consistently voted with Cavour, whom he revered as the Prometheus of the new Italy, but after Cavour's death in 1861, he seldom appeared there, though he remained a member for another four years.

4 When Verdi's stint as a politician began, he was seriously contemplating retirement from the theatre – more than that, from composition itself, just as Rossini had done before him, at the height of his career. As a welcome counter-pole to his parliamentary duties, he threw himself heart and soul into the further development of his house and farm.

VERDI: Now that I am not churning out any more notes, I am planting cabbages and beans, and so forth and so on… but since this work is no longer enough to keep me busy, I have begun to hunt!!!! When I see a bird, then *bang*! I shoot; if I hit it, well and good; if I don't hit it, good night! I have a supply of good St Etienne guns, but I have it in mind to get a double-barrelled *Le Faucheux* with a double action; that is to say, *the old system* where you load powder and shot, together with *the system called Le Faucheux* with cartridges. Here they have these splendid, indeed beautiful Belgian guns at a tolerable price; but I dearly covet a real one from the inventor himself, provided the price isn't too high… Perhaps if I were to tell the manufacturer that it is for the use not of a skilled hunter but of a maestro di musica… Who knows?

Guns and hunting became something of an obsession with him, and he wrote to friends about it with an enthusiasm seldom encountered in his letters about operas.

VERDI: Hunting quail is the business of the day, and we shall soon be catching dozens in the nets and getting others with our guns – if we know how to shoot straight! As it is, we come home every morning with eight or ten birds of all sizes, and without going any farther from the house than the range of a couple of shots!

But truth to tell, it was hard for him not to compose. The reasons for his flirtation with a Rossini-like retirement were not purely artistic, not because he was in any way a burnt-out case, but they were sad – and embittered.

VERDI: I have loved this art with all my soul, and ever shall, and when I am all alone, doing battle with my notes, then does my heart pound, then do the tears stream from my eyes, and my emotions and joys are beyond description; but when I consider that these poor notes are to be thrown to people of no intelligence, to a publisher who sells them to be used later for entertaining the crowd, or to be jeered at, oh, then, I tell you, then I no longer love anything!… But in truth this is something I would prefer not to discuss.

5 What with extensive rebuilding operations at Sant' Agata, Verdi soon began to feel the pinch financially, and in 1861 he accepted a commission to write an opera for St. Petersburg. It says something for his international prestige that his next four operas were written not for Italian opera houses at all, but for St Petersburg, London, Paris – and Cairo, of all unexpected places.

The Spring of 1865 found him again in Paris, supervising a revised version of *Macbeth.* While there he also accepted a new commission for a five-act opera based on Schiller's drama *Don Carlos*. But hardly had he returned to Sant' Agata to begin work on it than Italy became embroiled once again in war with Austria.

The Austro-Prussian War lasted only seven weeks, but it held out the very real prospect that Venice and Venetia would become Italian once again. 'So let it be war,' Verdi wrote, 'and may it be welcome.' Not so welcome was the fact that if war should

break out, Sant' Agata, not far from the banks of the River Po, would be in the front line. In June, Verdi reported to a friend:

VERDI: I'm remaining here for the moment but if I hear a single cannon, I myself shall be off like a shot. The very idea of those Austrians here would make me run a thousand miles without once stopping for breath, just to avoid seeing those ugly mugs. I would go first to Genoa, and stay there until the very last moment before I should have to leave for Paris. I say 'should have to' because the thought of leaving Italy at a time like this weighs heavily on me. I am, of course, neither young enough nor strong enough to go to war; nor am I any good at giving advice; indeed I'm not really good for anything. But without the necessity of going to Paris, I would still have stayed here, I would have tried hard, I would have done everything I could, however small – and I would have enjoyed it and suffered with my own people, as have so many, many others.

6 Verdi tried to get the contract for *Don Carlos* cancelled, but to no avail. Having finished it, in 1866, he travelled to Paris to oversee its production, resigned to the by-now expected squabbles with singers and management alike. The work itself is another intriguing mixture: both exceptionally long *and* long-winded, and it also contains some of his most powerful music and his most profound characterisations. In this scene, the heroine Elisabeth, in the cloister of a monastery, prepares to renounce her young lover Don Carlo, and reflects both on their earlier love and on the need now to part from him forever.

7 **Don Carlo: 'Tu che la vanità'**

8 *Don Carlo* scored a tremendous hit with critics and audiences alike. But back home in Italy its success had a deeper resonance. In the words of Verdi's close friend the conductor Angelo Mariani:

MARIANI: Verdi's triumph was stupendous, and fully worthy of his genius. This was something we Italians badly needed, because our government and generals did not know how to do their duty during the terrible times we endured last year. Nor will foreigners any longer be able to say that in the field of music we have degenerated, from the time of our great forefathers. So 'Viva Verdi', who alone can raise the flag of Italy's musical genius in the very heart of Europe.

9 From Paris, the Verdis travelled to Genoa where they'd recently bought an apartment as an alternative to Sant' Agata during the winter months. With the coming of warmer weather, Verdi began regularly to commute between the two, while Giuseppina stayed in Genoa. And why?

STREPPONI: Because our maestro had conceived the brilliant idea of building a steam engine to draw water from a little river that flows near the house: to achieve this, he needed an underground pipe to be laid six metres down for a length of twenty-five metres, plus a well some seven metres deep. Now at that depth you find a lot of water and sand that cause no end of trouble. Thus our illustrious maestro may be found daily at the bottom of his excavation, encouraging the workers, prodding them on, and, above all, of course, giving them directions. Giving them directions?!!! Ah but this is the Signor Maestro's weak point. If you tell him that *Don Carlos* isn't worth a thing, he won't give a damn, but if you suggest that he's not a good stonemason's helper, oh that he'll take very badly!

Verdi was still in Paris when he received the news that his father was dead. Six months later Antonio Barezzi, too, died, which caused him still greater grief. As he wrote to a friend:

VERDI: Oh but this loss will be dreadfully sad for me! Over the last three or four days his condition has improved, but alas it seems clear that this is just temporary relief that at best will keep him alive for a few days more! Ah poor

old man, who loved me so! And poor me, who will see him for only a little longer and then never again! You know that I owe everything to him – everything, everything, everything. Not to others, as people wanted it to seem, but to him alone. I can still see him (it was many, many years ago) when I had finished my studies at the Ginnasio in Busseto and my father told me that he would not be able to pay my way to University. I had decided to go back to the village where I was born. But this good old man, when he heard this, said to me 'You are born for something better; you were not made to sell salt and be a farm-worker; ask the Monte di Pieta for the meagre scholarship of 25 francs a month for four years, and I will do the rest; you will go to Milan Conservatory, and when you can, you can pay me back the money'. And that, of course, is what happened! How good he was! How generous and understanding. I have known a lot of men, but none better than he! He loved me as much as he loved his children, and I loved him as much as I loved my father!

If not, indeed, a great deal more. Verdi's love for his real father, as we've seen, was elusive, to say the least.

A little over a year later, Verdi experienced a different kind of sorrow with the death of Rossini. In honour of the great man he proposed a Requiem Mass, to which each of Italy's leading composers would contribute a movement or section. Thirteen composers were chosen, none of them remotely in Verdi's class, and the music was duly written. But the project foundered, thanks to the lack of co-operation from the impresario at Bologna, where the performance was to have taken place, and also, as Verdi saw it, the insufficient enthusiasm of the appointed conductor, his old friend Angelo Mariani. The failure of the project rankled with him for many years, and it was the beginning of the end – the tragic end – of his friendship with Mariani.

10 Perhaps the highpoint of that year, 1868, was Verdi's first meeting with the great Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni, whom he revered almost to the point of idolatry. It was made possible by the enterprise of Strepponi, who had introduced herself to the great

man with a view to precisely that end. Verdi was overcome with admiration and gratitude. And after the meeting itself?

VERDI: What can I say about Manzoni? How can I describe the indefinable feeling of extreme sweetness which came over me in the presence of that Saint? If one could adore a man, I would have knelt down in front of him. We're told we mustn't do such things, yet on the altar we worship many saints who have nothing of Manzoni's gifts nor of his virtues.

Verdi's references to sainthood and the altar are interesting because of his lifelong anti-clerical attitudes, which had at least some of their origin in the church's opposition to his appointment as church organist and municipal music master of Busseto right back at the beginning of his career. But Giuseppina, who was a devout churchgoer, suggests that anti-clericalism wasn't the half of it.

STREPPONI: This old *pirate* lets himself be – I won't say quite an atheist, but certainly not much of a believer, and that with an obstinacy and a calm that makes you want to thrash him. I go on talking to him about the wonders of the heavens, the earth, the sea and so on, but all he does is to laugh in my face, freezing me in the midst of my burst of utterly divine enthusiasm, and saying: 'You are mad!' And unfortunately he says it in good faith!

But this isn't to say that he was incapable of religious feeling. For Verdi the man there was no contradiction between his conceiving a Requiem Mass for Rossini and his own unbelief in the dogmas and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. However abrasive and sometimes abusive his behaviour could be, there was a burning, even passionate morality about him that impressed almost everyone who came into any kind of prolonged contact with him.

11 In February of 1869 Verdi embarked on a one-man crusade to reform the ailing institution of the Italian opera house. For years he'd been disgusted at the way his operas

were produced at La Scala, and when government subsidy dried up he undertook to restore the fortunes of the theatre, both artistically and financially, single-handed. Coaching all the singers personally and taking full charge of the production, he mounted a revised version of the opera he'd written for Russia in 1862, *La forza del destino* (The Force of Destiny). This is a very unusual opera indeed – a fascinating blend, as one commentator put it, of high tragedy and variety show. Here, for the first time in many years, and in the most unexpected setting – a really extravagantly grim and bloody tale – Verdi's native sense of humour came to the fore. He even regarded the two main comic parts as the principal roles in the opera. This was a distinctly new development, and a very healthy sign indeed. But there's no humour at all in one of the opera's most famous scenes, in which the hero Alvaro, wounded on the battlefield and believing himself to be dying, entrusts to his friend Carlos a small, sealed casket containing a letter which he insists must be burnt after his death.

12 **La forza del destino: 'Solenne in quest'ora'**

13 The production of *La forza del destino* at La Scala in 1869 was a major triumph for Verdi, and he almost immediately began scouting around in search of a subject for a new opera. But the spur, as it happens, came from outside. In that same year he was approached by the Khedive of Egypt, of all unexpected people, to write an opera for Cairo. He accepted, but it was slow to get off the ground for various reasons, among them an unexpected distraction, in the form of a woman.

In that production of *La forza del destino* at La Scala, the lead soprano had been the Czech-born Teresa Stolz, who seems to have attracted Verdi's attention from the very start of their acquaintance, a year or so earlier. But she was no *femme fatale*: Plump, energetic, high-spirited, and good-humoured, she wasn't especially pretty, nor apparently was she all that bright, but she was full of vitality, she had a lovely voice, an intuitive flair for Verdi's music and the vocal technique to bring it off. But already the plot thickens. She was also first the mistress then the fiancée of Angelo Mariani, the very conductor blamed by Verdi for the failure of the Rossini Requiem project, *and*, remember, one of his closest friends. That friendship was to be eroded still further – to

breaking point, actually – when Mariani first dithered about going to Cairo to conduct the new opera, and then had what Verdi saw as the astounding audacity to introduce *Wagner* to Italian audiences with performances of *Lohengrin* in Bologna. Wagner – the German colossus whose influence on Italian composers Verdi deplored.

In the months that followed, Verdi and Stolz grew steadily closer and she became a frequent guest at Sant' Agata. In this newly poisoned anti-Mariani environment, both Verdi and Strepponi strenuously encouraged Stolz to leave Mariani, which it seems she was more than ready to do. But it was a messy business, and what nobody knew at the time, except possibly Stolz, is that Mariani was already mortally ill with cancer. By the time Mariani himself made it generally known, Giuseppina, who had never liked him, merely scoffed and suggested that he was making it up. This was unlike her. The savagery of the Verdis' final treatment of Mariani has never been satisfactorily explained. But savage it was.

At their last meeting, at the railway station in Bologna, Mariani offered to carry Verdi's bag and was rudely rebuffed. He later learned, uncomprehendingly, that guests at the Verdis' were forbidden so much as to mention his name, and that if anyone slipped up the subject of conversation was abruptly changed. But nothing is more shocking than a letter written by the normally generous and benign Giuseppina. After visiting the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin at Loreto, Mariani, who seemed quite unable to acknowledge the death of their friendship, wrote to them,

MARIANI: Yesterday I was at Loreto (don't laugh) because who knows whether the Madonna might not cure me, since the medical treatment for my sufferings didn't make me any better. You will laugh; but that's what I did!

In answer to this friendly letter from a dying man in constant and severe pain, Giuseppina penned a letter whose cruelty is unique in the whole of her voluminous correspondence. Indeed at times it becomes almost incoherent. These are not the words of a well woman:

STREPPONI: Just before the feast-day of the saint whose name you ought to bear, you really wanted, didn't you, to spit out one of the most insolent bits of

stupidity that have ever been spoken in our era. Ah, if you only you were sincere! Your limitless vanity forces you forever to pose, even as one of the most vulgar bigots in the whole Papist crowd! Verdi gave me your oh-so-pious letter, between a little smile and a 'pouah!' That you visit Loreto to make people talk about your faith and your great devotion to the Madonna is something you can explain to the husbands of your former mistresses. Matters of vanity and egotism can be weighed on the scale of your Ego, for a change, but that you should dare to make a fool of Verdi and of your beloved servant with such a display – oh, for God's sake, desist! We would rather have your vanity drag you down to the level of the ridiculous, saying boldly that Napoleon III reined in his horse and stopped to say, *'Are you, Mariani? What can I do for you?' 'Sire, save Italy!' and one hundred thousand Frenchmen ran straight to the frontier just to please you.* The sheer scale of your charlatanism is valuable only for provoking laughter. But that you would be such a hypocrite as to want to make people believe that you go to the Madonna so that she can heal that jewel, your bladder, the subject of your conversation with everyone!… Now, Mariani, if you care about keeping the relationship with Verdi that you damaged so badly last autumn, take great care what you say and do, what you advise your friends, who are not strictly honest, so that they won't do anything rash. I know you will not answer me, or that if you do, it will be with a letter the size of a book; but I have said what I want to say to you, and will not discuss this subject again. You can burn this letter so that the coming generations will not find it amongst those that you are keeping to add lustre to your vanity.

Unique in her correspondence that may be, but in her private letter-book, she refers to him as ‘the filthiest and vilest figure on earth’, and remarks:

STREPPONI: This man's words are filth, like his soul, and he tries to pass as the most *chaste* person.

What *can* he have done to unleash this degree of venom in a woman far from venomous?

In the search for an answer, one possibility presents itself as at least part of the puzzle: he had introduced Verdi to Teresa Stolz.

And what was this to Giuseppina? More, probably, than it might have been if Verdi hadn't forbidden her to accompany him to Milan for the rehearsals of *La forza del destino* in which Stolz, as it happens, was the featured soprano.

14 **La forza del destino: 'Pace, pace'**

15 The aria 'Pace, pace' from the last act of *La forza del destino.*

Well before the first performance, Giuseppina had reason to believe, or so she thought, that Verdi's relationship with Stolz was more than merely professional. Two weeks before the opening night, she wrote to him in obvious pain.

STREPPONI: When last Spring my heart led me boldly to introduce myself to Clarina Maffei and to Manzoni, so as to come home bearing all sorts of things you would like – when we took that trip together to Milan and visited Manzoni and sailed along the lake, with the result that you returned to the land of your early triumphs, little could I have imagined the strange and cruel outcome, that you should have disowned me thus… May God forgive you the sharp and humiliating wound you have dealt me.

How she felt Verdi had 'disowned' her we don't know but there was certainly no disowning in the long run. Their marriage survived, though evidently with a good deal more sacrifice on her part than his (so what else is new?), and Teresa Stolz became a frequent visitor to Sant' Agata as the guest of both Verdis, often staying for protracted periods of time. Whatever her inner feelings, Giuseppina consistently treated Stolz as the dearest and most valued of friends. Indeed she came close to overdoing it.

STREPPONI: Dearest Teresa, what I wish more than anything is to embrace you again and stay as long as possible in your company, because I love you, admire

you and am attracted by your frank, sincere and elevated character, in no way tainted by the air of the *coulisses.*

But knowing Strepponi, it could well have been absolutely genuine.

Nevertheless, rumours that Verdi and Stolz were lovers, that they had an affair, went the rounds at the time, and persisted long after his death. But there's no evidence to prove it one way or the other. One can hardly read all the correspondence, though, without getting the very strong feeling that the two were genuinely and lastingly in love. If they *didn't* have a physical affair, it's a great credit to their strength of character. But the price paid for the salvation of Giuseppina's marriage was a heavy one. Her friendship with Stolz may well have been as genuine as she made it sound, but we get a harrowing picture of the background to it from the draft of a letter to Verdi found in her letter-book but never apparently sent or delivered. The date was April 1876, almost ten years after Verdi's first association with Stolz. The exact circumstances surrounding the letter we don't know, but the confusion of the language and the authenticity of the suffering it bespeaks is unmistakable.

STREPPONI: 'It didn't seem to me an appropriate day for you to be calling on a lady who is neither your daughter, nor your sister, nor your wife!' The remark escaped me and I saw immediately that I had annoyed you. It's perfectly natural, this ill humour of yours wounded me, since she's not ill and there's no performance, it seemed to me you might manage to spend twenty-four hours without seeing the said lady, all the more since I had taken the trouble, so as not to fail in my own attention towards her, of asking her personally how she was; I told you as soon as I got home. I don't know if there's anything in it, or not… but I do know that since 1872 there have been periods of persistent attentions on your part that no woman could interpret in a more favourable sense. I know that I have never failed to show cordiality and courtesy to this person. I know that I have always been disposed to love her frankly and sincerely. And *you* know how you have repaid me! With harsh, violent, biting words! But then I open my heart to the hope that you will see things, and this person, as they are. If there's

anything in it… Let's get this over with. If you find this person so seductive, have the courage and honesty to say so, without making me suffer the humiliation of your excessive deference. If there's nothing in it, then be calmer in your attentions, don't get yourself so worked up, be natural – and less exclusive. Reflect sometimes that I, your wife, despising past rumours, am living at this very moment *à trois,* and that I have the right to ask, if not for your caresses, at least for your consideration. Is that too much? How calm, carefree and happy I was for those first twenty days! And that was because you were cordial…

And there it stops.

Later in the same year, Verdi was approached with that proposal from Cairo – namely, that he should write an opera to inaugurate a new theatre, built to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal. Twice the proposition was put to him, twice he declined it. But when he was sent the proposed scenario he changed his mind. He accepted the commission and the result was one of the most popular and commercially successful operas he ever wrote: *Aida*. Critics and musicians tend to agree that the work as a whole is far from Verdi's greatest, but they're generally agreed, too, that Act III, the Nile Scene, with the duet between Aida and her father, is among the most inspired things he ever wrote.

16 **Aida: Act III, Nile Scene (excerpts)**

CD 4

1 The Italian premiere of *Aida* was heralded by a veritable tidal wave of publicity and gossip that greatly disturbed Verdi, whose lifelong hatred of publicity was well known. And he was furious when Ricordi actually showed the score to some people well before the opening night.

VERDI: You were quite wrong to show *Aida* to any outsiders. Advance judgements have no value and do no good to anyone. All such judgements are to be mistrusted, whether they come from friends or enemies.

To a journalist who was already part of the press publicity pack, he wrote, with a curious mixture of sorrow, contempt, and nostalgia:

VERDI: It appears that art like this is no longer art at all, but rather a trade, a mere game played for pleasure, a hunting party, a commonplace thing that everyone runs to see, a thing to which people want to bring – if not success – at least notoriety, no matter what the cost! The only emotion I can feel now is disgust! Humiliation! How fondly I recall my early years, when, almost friendless, without anyone who talked about me, without any advance preparations, without influence of any kind, I went before the public with my operas, ready to *be shot,* and I was elated if I had any favourable response at all. But today, what an apparatus for an opera!! Journalists, artists, chorus people, directors, professors, etc., etc., all of them bringing their stones to help build the great *publicity* palace, creating nothing but a frame of little miseries that add nothing to the opera's worth – indeed, they *obscure* its value! This is deplorable, absolutely deplorable!

And in another letter to his publisher Ricordi:

VERDI: At the moment I am feeling so utterly disgusted, so nauseated, so *vexed* that I would put the whole score of *Aida* in the fire a thousand times over, without a single regret. But if this poor opera has to exist anyway, for the love of heaven, let it be without all this hoopla, which is the most humiliating of all humiliations for me.

Even a year later, long after the premiere, he still regarded the opera as some kind of jinx.

VERDI: Let us say nothing more about this *Aida,* which has brought me problems without end and immense artistic disillusionment, even if it has brought in money by the sackful! I wish I'd never written it, or never published it! If it could have remained in my briefcase after the first production, if it had been produced only under *my* direction, where and when *I* wished, then it would not have become a feeding trough for the evil and curious, to be analysed by your critics and miserable little maestros, who understand nothing of music, except for its basics, and even those badly. Speculators might have lost out; but art would have gained beyond measure.

Verdi himself, however (though he may not have known it), was about to enrich the art of music as never before, in his whole career.

2 The death of Alessandro Manzoni on the 22nd of May 1873, at the hardly premature age of eighty-eight, dealt a severe blow to Verdi, but it resulted in what most musicians agreed was his greatest work to date, a Requiem Mass for performance in the following year. Needless to say, coming from one of the supreme opera composers in history, its treatment of the liturgical text is intensely dramatic, and it's often been described, not always kindly, and with rather laboured wit, as Verdi's finest opera. But the fact is that the 'libretto' if we can think of it like that, is probably the most dramatic text he ever set. The technical mastery, throughout the work, is absolute, the handling of the soloists and the chorus is comparable with anything in the repertoire, the orchestration reaches new heights of both power and refinement, and the richness and quality of melodic invention has often been equated with Mozart's. Not even the most reluctant Verdian can escape the sheer spiritual power of the work or the burning, passionate integrity behind it.

3 **Requiem: 'Rex tremendae'**

4 Verdi was now in his early sixties. His rate of *composition* slowed considerably, but he was increasingly active as a conductor. Over the next few years he gave highly successful performances of both *Aida* and the Requiem, most notably in Milan, London,

Paris, and at the Lower Rhine Festival in Germany. The time he did spend on composition was largely devoted to revising *Simon Boccanegra* and *Don Carlos* for La Scala. But there was a big project in the making. In 1879, when Verdi was sixty-six, the composer and poet Arrigo Boito suggested that they collaborate on an operatic setting of Shakespeare's *Othello* – Boito providing the text, Verdi composing the music. In the event, it was to be the greatest of all Verdi's operas, but it was a long time coming. There were endless discussions about the libretto, and what with one thing and another Verdi didn't actually start writing the music until 1884, by which time he was seventy-one. At the same age, so to speak, most other great composers had been long dead. For Verdi to *start* a major masterpiece at such an age was unique in history. Two years later it was completed, and it had its first performance at La Scala, on the 5th of February 1887. It's interesting that though the opera is called *Otello*, after Shakespeare, both Verdi and Boito once considered calling it *Iago* instead, since it was the complex character of the villain that most intrigued them. Otello himself, though hardly a cardboard cut-out, is a more straightforward figure, but the character who in many ways tugs at the heartstrings most poignantly is the hapless Desdemona, Otello's innocent wife, who pays the ultimate price for his jealousy. In the last hours of her life, as she prepares for bed, she finds herself looking back to her childhood and offerring up a prayer to the Virgin Mary.

5 **Otello: 'Canzone del salce – Ave Maria'**

6 One of the last things Verdi liked to be called was 'Wagnerian'. His attitude to Wagner as a composer was one of great respect and admiration, but his letters make it abundantly clear that he saw Wagner's *influence* on the younger Italian composers as positively dangerous.

VERDI: It seems to me completely wrong-headed to speak, as some do, of the triumph of Italian art in our time. Our young composers are no longer good patriots. If the Germans, starting from Bach, get to Wagner, they are working as good Germans; well and good. So be it. But we who are descended from

Palestrina are committing a musical crime when we imitate Bach, doing thereby something that is not only useless but harmful.

Let alone imitating Wagner, whose influence in Italy was rife, as indeed it was throughout western Europe. One of the many great strengths of *Otello* is the degree to which Verdi gave young Italian composers an example of how truly modern 'music drama', to use a Wagnerian phrase, could develop along alternative lines, in accordance with Italian rather than Germanic traditions. In spite of the richness and variety of the orchestral writing (a prime factor in Germanic opera from Mozart to the present), the emphasis is still on the voices, and they are given great tunes and melodic phrases to sing. Verdi still works within the conventions of Italian melodrama, but both technically and imaginatively the difference between *Aida* and *Otello* is enormous.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of *Otello* – more, even, than its great set pieces – is the fluid melodic and dramatic, speech-based recitatives that link them and bind the whole work into a single, unified whole. It's something many composers have aimed at – a flexible vocal line, responsive to every mood and accent of the words, which is at the same time interesting in itself, as pure music. But very few have achieved it. In fact one highly authoritative and deeply reflective writer has limited the number to only two: Mozart – and Verdi.

7 **Otello: 'Desdemona rea, si, per ciel'**

8 After the huge success of their collaboration on *Otello*, Boito had relatively little trouble persuading Verdi to undertake another Shakespearian opera, this one a comedy, based on the character and adventures of the first and greatest 'fat man' in theatrical history, Falstaff.

Especially with the public having assumed that *Otello* was the final, crowning glory of his illustrious career, Verdi was thrilled at the idea. And who, after *Otello*, indeed after a lifetime as Italy's greatest tragedian, who would possibly guess that Verdi, now pushing eighty, would finish his operatic career with a comedy (an opera *buffa*), let

alone a masterpiece unsurpassed in his entire output? As he wrote to Boito, he was almost beside himself.

VERDI: But what a joy!!! To be able to say to the public, 'WE ARE HERE AGAIN!!! COME AND SEE US'!! So! Let's do it! For now, let's not even think about the obstacles, of age, or illnesses! I also want to keep it all the deepest *secret*: a word I underline three times to tell you that *no-one* must know anything about it! But hang on a minute… *Peppina* seems to have known about this before we did! But not to worry! She'll keep the secret. When women have this trait, they have more of it than we do… Anyway, as soon as you're in the mood – let the writing begin!

Boito, in fact, had already begun. Throughout the project they kept in close touch, and Verdi's enthusiasm never wavered. At the same time, he was feeling his age – as well he might in his eightieth year.

VERDI: When I was young, I could stay at the desk for ten or even twelve hours at a stretch, even if I was a little ill!! Sometimes I would sit working at my writing table from four in the morning to four in the afternoon, with nothing more than a cup of coffee in my stomach… But of course this is no longer possible. Then I was in command of my body, *and* my time. Now, sad to say, I am not.

In another report, he wrote to Boito:

VERDI: Oh this Big Belly is on the road to madness! On some days he scarcely moves, he sleeps, and is in a bad humour; on others he shouts, runs, jumps, fairly tears the place apart; I let him act up a bit, but if he goes on like this, I shall have to put him in a muzzle and straitjacket.

To which a delighted Boito answered:

BOITO: Terrific!!! Let him do it, let him run as he will; if he smashes all the glass and furniture in your room, never mind; you can always buy some more; if he breaks up your piano, don't fret; you can afford another one. Let him wreck everything if necessary, just so long as the *great scene* gets done. Hurrah! *Hit him! Hit him! Hit him! Hit him!! What pandemonium!!* But a pandemonium as bright as the sun and as crazy as a madhouse!! I already know what you're going to do. Hurrah!!!

In fact Verdi was doing one thing which Boito could not have known, and which no-one would have guessed. But Boito was the first (except presumably for Peppina) to be told.

VERDI: I hope you're working. Stranger still is that *I* am working. I'm having a wonderful time… writing *fugues*, would you believe! Yes**,** Sir! A fugue… and a *buffa* fugue at that!… it could go very nicely in *Falstaff.* What, a *buffa* fugue you will say? I don't know *how,* nor *why,* but yes – it ***is*** a *buffa* fugue.

What's more, it's a fugue, of all un-Verdian procedures, that brings the whole of *Falstaff* to its triumphant end.

Work on the opera continued apace, and true to her word Giuseppina kept her vow of secrecy, so much so that fully a year and a half after the start of the project, the only people 'in the know' were herself, Boito, and Verdi. Even his publisher Ricordi knew nothing about it. As it happens, it was Boito himself who let the cat out of the bag, at a dinner party in Milan, attended by the Verdis, the Ricordis, their daughter Ginetta, and her husband. As the latter reported:

GINETTA'S HUSBAND: Verdi was in a cheerful mood, and had never seemed younger to me. or in better spirits. In his appearance, words, and manner he looked like a thoroughly contented man. When the champagne was served, when everyone was in excellent spirits, Boito rose and, indicating that he wished to propose a toast, said: 'I drink to the health and victories of the Big Belly!' Everyone was surprised; no one had any idea what Boito was referring to.

Ricordi was the most surprised of all. Then Boito went on: ‘I drink to the health… of ***Falstaff***!’ Again surprise on Ricordi's part, for he still didn't understand. But *Signora* Ricordi had an intuition about the revelation and, leaning toward Signora Verdi's ear, asked her: 'A new opera?' And Signora Verdi nodded yes.

As soon as the news was out, it spread like wildfire. Never, perhaps, has an operatic opening night been awaited with greater expectancy, curiosity, or sheer enthusiasm than that of *Falstaff*, which had its premiere at La Scala on the 9th of February 1893. Any fears that Verdi might have been too old to pull this one off were very quickly dispelled. Once again, the old wizard, as Peppina called him, had turned up trumps.

9 **Falstaff: Finale ‘Ogni sorta di gente; Facciamo il parentado’**

10 *Falstaff* marked the end of Verdi's operatic career, but not the end of his activities as a composer. Despite his several threatened retirements, he could scarcely stop himself from writing music. As Peppina had said some years earlier:

STREPPONI: For a long time I have been hearing him sing 'I don't want to write' in every key… But once he is committed to a project everything will change. He will leave his trees, his building projects, his machines and guns. He will let his artistic passion take him over; he will devote his entire self to his libretto, his music; and I hope that the world will be the richer for it.

And it was no different now. As Verdi never really thought it would be. Composition acted on him almost like a drug. It was both a joy and a compulsion – as he confessed to the conductor Edoardo Mascheroni.

VERDI: Every man has his destiny. And mine? I, like a mad dog with its tongue hanging out, I am fated to *work* until my last gasp.

His last works find him still in full command of his faculties, but they're inevitably coloured by the infirmities and losses of old age. He'd outlived many of his closest friends, he was growing notably more frail, and his closest friend of all, Peppina, was declining fast. During her last illness, when she was very infirm indeed, badly crippled by arthritis, Verdi wrote to Boito, updating him on his own condition and inviting him – well, *asking* him - to visit them.

VERDI: As for myself, I'm not very sick, but have a thousand little ailments. My legs scarcely hold me up any longer and I hardly walk any more; my sight is poor and I can only read for short periods – on top of which, I'm getting deaf. All in all, you see, a multitude of little failings. So you must understand that if Sant' Agata was boring before, it's now just terribly, terribly sad! If you will come, and have the courage to face so much illness, you will be as welcome as ever and will perform one of the Acts of Charity: No. 6: *Visit the sick.*

On the 14th of November 1897 Giuseppina died, bringing to an end a friendship of more than half a century. In the final words of her will, she bade her husband a formal farewell.

STREPPONI: And now, addio, my Verdi. As we were united in life, may God rejoin our spirits in Heaven.

When her lawyer Amilcare Martinelli arrived at the villa a little time later, he was told at first that Verdi was seeing no-one, but was later allowed to visit him in his room.

AMILCARE MARTINELLI: He was standing bolt upright in front of his chair… The desk was covered with papers. The piano was closed. His chin was down on his chest, and his cheeks were bright with a purplish colour. He stammered a few words. 'I don't feel like talking. Tell Barberina that she should have obeyed me and left yesterday. It would have been better.'

11 After Giuseppina's funeral, Verdi returned to Sant' Agata, still requesting solitude. As he wrote to a friend:

VERDI: Great sorrow does not demand great expression; it asks only for silence, isolation, I would even say the torture of reflection.

But he was not allowed to be alone too much. Teresa Stolz, now sixty-three, was often at his side, as were other friends, mostly the Ricordis, the Boitos, and a number of relations. On Christmas Eve, surrounded by friends, among them Boito, he seemed much like his old self.

BOITO: Christmas Eve reminded him of all the holy wonders of childhood, the enchantments of faith, which is truly celestial only if it reaches upward as far as a belief in miracles. Alas, like all of us, he had lost that credulity early on, but perhaps more than most of us, he kept a poignant regret for it all his life. He seems much better now, his health has not suffered, and every day he is getting back a bit more of his emotional equilibrium.

A year or so later, he seemed actually to have shed a few years.

BOITO: He plays the piano, eats as he pleases, goes for walks, and argues with all the vitality of youth. Indeed he is as merry as a lark!

This was Verdi among friends. To the public, though, he remained somewhat forbidding and austere, as well he might. He now enjoyed the status of a modern Colossus, and it was a reputation richly earned. We get an interesting outsider's view of the old Verdi from the journalist Jacopo Zannari, quite a different picture from Boito's:

ZANNARI: Not at all expansive, severe in appearance, stingy with words, Verdi kept very much to himself. He wore black suits and his soft, wide-brimmed hat, and went in the morning to drink the waters at the springs of Regina or Savi more often than those of Tettuccio, which has a bigger flow and attracts more people.

He sipped them very slowly. In the afternoon he walked to the spring of Il Rinfresco. When he became aware that he was the target of stares of the too-curious, he moved or left. He spent almost all day in his apartment: he took lunch there, but for dinner he came down to the round table of the Locanda Maggiore, sharing the meal, sitting at the head of the table, a place that everyone respectfully kept for him. In the evening he went upstairs early, and before going to bed he enjoyed himself for an hour or so playing card games, *tresette* or *briscola* and other four-player games that always put him in a good humour right away. He prided himself on being very skilful at these games.

12 The role of Teresa Stolz in Verdi's last years is both fascinating and touching. They never lived together, nor did they stay at the same hotels, but they were generally close by, and in their correspondence, which leaves not the slightest doubt of the love they had for each other, her letters are always somewhat formal. There's none of that irreverent humour that one finds in many of Strepponi's letters to her 'Wizard' – or 'Pasticcio', as she often called him. But the joy with which they anticipated seeing one another, even when he was eighty-seven and she was sixty-six, is inescapably touching. From him, after a brief visit by her to Sant' Agata:

VERDI: Dearest, delightful hours, but too short! And who knows when even ones as short as those will come again! Oh an old man's life is truly unhappy! Even without real illness, life is a burden and I feel that vitality and strength are diminishing, each day more than the one before. I feel this within myself and I don't have the courage and power to keep busy with anything… Love me well always, and believe in my love – great, very, very great, and very true.

And a week or so later, anticipating her return:

VERDI: So everything is set for Saturday morning at nine. I will send a carriage to bring you to Sant' Agata. Oh! Joy! Joy! I am truly happy, even though my health isn't what it might be.

And this from Stolz, confirming the arrangements:

STOLZ: Your letter received yesterday evening. Thanks. It is settled. I shall be
in Borgo San Donnino tomorrow, Saturday at nine in the morning. What joy!!
What happiness!! Your very affectionate, Teresa.

Stolz stayed at the villa for about a week and then Verdi left, on his own, for Milan, where he spent more and more time, besieged though he was by visitors from all over – journalists, musicians, writers, young composers – and young conductors, one of whom, named Arturo Toscanini, consulted Verdi about his final masterpiece, the *Te Deum*, which Toscanini was then preparing for performance, and which he continued to champion throughout his life.

13 **Te Deum**

14 Arturo Toscanini, in 1946, conducting part of the great *Te Deum* which concludes the *Quattri Pezzi Sacri* (Four Sacred Pieces) published in 1898.

Toscanini visited Verdi again in January 1901. The year had begun well enough, as Verdi reported to his sister-in-law Barberina Strepponi:

VERDI: New Years Day 1901. I am quite well, as ever, but I am absolutely
attached to my chair and hardly moving. Let's hope that beautiful days like this
one will go on, and then we will also be free of the cold. I am writing only a little
now, because writing tires me, but you, with your firm hand, *you* write to *me*! I
know Maria gives you my news. She is fine and sends her regards. With my
whole heart, I grasp your hands.

When Toscanini called on him some three weeks later, he was very cordially received, as before, but he was distressed to find Verdi in a state of some confusion. On the following morning, the old man began to tremble, his fingers struggling in vain with the buttons of his waistcoat as he tried to get dressed. ‘One button more, one button less,' he muttered,

and he never said another word. Felled by a stroke that would have killed many a younger man, he hung on, unconscious, for a week, and at 3.00 in the morning on the 27th of January he died. Boito had been by his bedside for much of that week, and recalled:

BOITO: He died magnificently, like a fighter, formidable and mute. The silence of death had fallen over him a week before he died. With head bowed on his breast and knitted brows he looked downwards and seemed to weigh with his glance an unknown and formidable adversary and to calculate mentally the forces needed to oppose him. His resistance was heroic. The breathing of his great chest sustained him for four days and three nights. On the fourth night the sound of his breathing still filled the room, but what a struggle, poor Maestro! How brave and handsome he was, up to the last moment! In the course of my life I have lost those I have idolised, and grief has outlasted resignation. But never have I experienced such a feeling of hatred against death, of such loathing for that mysterious, blind, stupid, triumphant and craven power. It needed the death of this octogenarian to arouse those feelings in me. He too hated it, for he was the most powerful expression of life that it is possible to imagine. He hated it as he hated laziness, enigmas and doubt. But now all is over. He sleeps like a King of Spain in his Escurial, under a bronze slab that completely covers him.

It was only hours after Verdi's death that the Italian Senate was called into special session on Sunday 27 January. No-one was absent. Eulogy followed eulogy, and the President of the Council of Ministers eloquently lamented the extinguishing of ‘that shining star who illuminated the entire civilised world with his glory'.

MINISTER: This great man and artist deserved, more than anyone, to be the symbol of the heroic era of our Risorgimento, because of the mystic fusion of his music and the longed-for, prayed-for unity of the nation around the throne of its first king. Verdi was our great unifier, when the wave of his passionate music,

something that the enemy could not seize, embodied the idea of the nation, which swept freely from the Alps to the sea, setting our hearts on fire.

On the day of the funeral, men and women of the highest rank, from many countries, converged on Milan to pay their last respects to a man regarded by many as the greatest musician of his time. No head of state, no monarch, in the nineteenth century attracted a greater number or eminence of dignitaries to his funeral than Verdi. Tens of thousands of people lined the streets, and at one point, as if by some unseen celestial signal, they began spontaneously to sing the chorus of the Hebrew slaves from *Nabucco,* which had become a kind of unofficial anthem for a unified Italy.

15 **Nabucco: Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves 'Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate'**

In the words of a contemporary report:

REPORTER: The white road along the outside of the city walls, broad and lined with huge horse chestnut tress, was boiling with a restless throng that was obviously struck with emotion. At Porta Garibaldi, the crowd packed the whole area… A wave of silence moved ahead of the procession. Then the ranks of the Savoia cavalry filled the entire street. At the sides, soldiers and national policemen formed a great, empty open square space. In the middle was the priest: two candles at the sides. Then the hearse with a narrow, black coffin on it. Then another rank of troops closed the open area at the rear and kept back the crowd that was pressing from behind… The people moved together in a strange, disorderly way, like ocean waves… At the cemetery, where the whole square before the gate was sealed off, the crowd stood, motionless, silent… Formality, the ancient, classical Italian evil, was conquered that day by the grand will of the Old Man, wise and provident maestro, even after death. No apotheosis for the dead was ever more magnificent than that silence, which he commanded from his simple bier.

But the breaking of that silence, when it came, heralded a century and more in which Verdi's music would resound the world over at the very centre of the operatic repertoire, taking its rightful place next to the epoch-making masterworks of Mozart and Wagner. A true peasant he may never have been, but his music continues to reach the hearts of a wider range of people, from the humblest to the most illustrious, than that, perhaps, of any other so-called 'classical' composer. And there is no reason to believe that it will ever cease to do so.

16 **Requiem, Part VII: Dies irae; Requiem aeternam; Libera me**

- END -