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Andreas Giger, *Verdi and the French Aesthetic: Verse, Stanza, and Melody in Nineteenth-Century Opera*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. x + 294 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-87843-2

Review by Diana R. Hallman, University of Kentucky.

A recurring fascination in Verdian scholarship has centered on the nature of French influence in the composer's operatic development, not only in works that he adapted or created for the Paris Opéra, but also in his middle to late Italian operas written after his direct contact with the French stage. Linking with studies of Rossini and Donizetti's adaptations for Paris, scholars have explored a range of musical and dramatic traits of Verdi's "French manner" in *Jérusalem*, his transformation of *I lombardi* which first appeared at the Opéra in 1847, *Les Vêpres siciliennes* of 1855, and the full-blown French grand opera *Don Carlos* of 1867. While some studies have dealt with Verdi's French literary sources, or have looked outside Opéra practices for French influence, as in Emilio Sala's tracing of dramaturgical elements to Parisian boulevard theaters, [1] many central Verdian interpretations have alluded to the imprint of French opera—particularly grand opera—on the composer's dramatic art. However, most attention has been paid to the most easily observable aspects, from Verdi's use of French-style choral scenes and polychoral writing to his integration of strophic and ternary forms, with suggestions of French inspiration in his increasingly rich harmonic language and dramatic orchestration.

In the present book, Andreas Giger takes a less travelled path in the exploration of Verdi's French connections. Not only does he examine Verdi's treatment of French prosody in his operas adapted or written for Paris more thoroughly than other studies to date, but he delves into an even more complex subject that few scholars have been willing to tackle: the possible influences of French aesthetics and practices on Verdi's increasingly expressive and dramatic melodic style in both French and Italian operas. [2] With this publication, Giger continues the work presented in his dissertation, "The Role of Giuseppe Verdi's French Operas in the Transformation of His Melodic Style" (Indiana University, 1999), as well as various articles and a chapter on the composer's French influence. [3]

Giger grounds his study with his two preliminary chapters in part one. In chapter one, "Rhythm and stanza in French and Italian librettos," he reviews and compares intricate theories of prosody and versification, and in chapter two, "French and Italian melodic aesthetics and practice ca. 1830-1870," he discusses the relationship between versification and musical treatment. In the following three analytical chapters of part two, the author concentrates on aspects of Verdi's French-inspired melody, first in *Jérusalem*, and then in *Les Vêpres siciliennes* and *Don Carlos*. In each case, he considers the effects of the composer's increasing mastery of French practices on his subsequent Italian works, including frequent cross-references to theories of accentuation and prosodic and musical concepts that he discussed previously.

Giger's introductory discussion pointedly reveals the complications surrounding an understanding of French versification, particularly in opera librettos. Not only do treatises on French verse offer variable, and sometimes contradictory, approaches, but they often ignore librettos, which tended to bend rules to allow greater flexibility in the musical setting. Among the twenty-nine treatises by French,

Italian, and German theorists and critics examined by Giger (and listed in a helpful appendix), most are from the nineteenth century, but Jean François Marmontel's *Éléments de littérature* of 1787 is also consulted, as well as three publications dated 1904, 1911, and 1912. With these early twentieth-century studies, along with four from the 1880s and 1890s, Giger chooses studies that fit within Verdi's later compositional period up to *Falstaff* or lie only a few years removed from the date of his death (1901) -- though one imagines that many of these reflect changing ideals about French verse somewhat removed from the theories of the early- to mid-nineteenth century, and perhaps from Verdi's own practices. Nevertheless, Giger freely compares ideas in Louis-Marie Quicherat's *Traité de versification française* of 1850 (second ed.) to Eugène Landry's study of 1911 without further qualification, even though he suggests that his intent is to survey the varied choices that a nineteenth-century operatic composer (ultimately, Verdi) would have had at his disposal (p. 17). However, Giger does imply that broad theoretical connections exist over time when he points out that nineteenth-century sources themselves developed their rules from theories of previous centuries, often conflating a classically based system of quantitative meters with one built on stress accents, but with an emphasis on the latter in mid-century.

Giger compares the theorists' varied approaches to accentuation, those that 1) "discern regular patterns of metric feet," 2) "observe a set number of accents per verse," or 3) "see irregular rhythmic groups, defined by syntax and sense, as punctuated by accents" (p. 10). Others who ignore accentuation rely on "syllable count, rhyme, and caesura" in descriptions of French verse (p. 10). In illustrating the second approach, Giger cites the Italian perspective of Antonio Scoppo, who disregarded the "inherent accentual irregularity of French verse" but who influenced many French theorists, particularly during a time when Italian opera captivated Parisians and when the Italian manner of regular accentuation made its way into some French grand opera librettos (pp. 11-12). The author rightfully spends time with the alexandrine and its relationship to the caesura, noting its displacement after the sixth syllable with "unorthodox divisions" such as the "Romantic alexandrine of 4+4+4 syllables"--which he finds in Verdi's French librettos. Giger also makes a rare attempt to define the stanza in French librettos, which was not as clearly distinguished from non-stanzaic verse as in the Italian *versi lirici* and *versi sciolti*. He emphasizes the consideration of multiple criteria, including "unity of thought, rhyme scheme, number of different meters, and spatial separation" (p. 21). He ends his chapter with a basic comparison of French and Italian versification, which enhances later discussions.

In characterizing French and Italian melodic practices ca. 1830-70 in Chapter two, Giger recognizes the ambiguities in critical accounts and the elusiveness of any "pure" national style, reminding readers that Cherubini and other Italians had left their mark on French operatic music and pedagogy and that French-Italian stylistic interactions continued into the mid-century, creating a "large common set of musical characteristics" (p. 46). He sets out to prove, however, that clear distinctions did in fact exist in the minds of critics, theorists, and composers, and in the music itself. To illustrate French practice, he draws upon both French grand operas and opéras-comiques which he surmises that Verdi likely knew (works of Halévy, Meyerbeer, Auber, Grétry, and Adam, as well as Thomas's *Mignon* and Gounod's *Faust*); for Italian practice, he turns to examples of Bellini and Donizetti, as well as early Verdi. In consideration of textual-musical alignment, he seeks to define French melody broadly, enveloping rhythm, harmony, prosody, and accompaniment, and he generally accepts the French emphasis on "a melody's originality and expressive quality, which often came at the expense of symmetry or resulted in rhythmic-metric ambiguity," in contrast to the Italians' creation of "a melodic rhythm that corresponded with the underlying meter" (p. 47). While searching for correspondences between composers' choices and theorists' guidelines, he acknowledges that French librettists "often did not provide regular rhythmic structures" required by certain theorists or that composers disapproved of certain theories and freely mixed (or ignored) prosodic approaches in order to create melodic and rhythmic interest and originality and to meet the challenges of irregularly accented verse (pp. 56-57). Despite such challenges, Giger makes convincing distinctions between French and Italian practice, emphasizing the French concentration on melodic variety and rhythmic flexibility as well as the bond between the

French concept of melody and the use of “harmonically interesting and expressive accompaniments” (p. 76), ideas that he draws upon in his Verdian analyses.

Also undergirding his interpretive foundation is a short section entitled “Episode: Design, middleground rhythm, and phrase.” Although Giger suggests that this section is not essential to his later interpretations, it in fact helps to clarify his many references to “design” (a word taken from Antoine Reicha’s vocabulary which the author uses to form a concept of phrasing), modern theories regarding “middleground rhythm,” and the methods and ideas used for determining phrase structure.

Following this section, Giger begins his focus on Verdi’s adaptation and eventual mastery of French prosodic and melodic practices with a comparison of portions of *Jérusalem* that were borrowed or revised from *I lombardi*. While he does suggest that minor musical changes in reused melodies represent the composer’s response to accentual changes in the French libretto or subtle shifts towards French aesthetics, Giger concludes that, in Verdi’s creation of original music for *Jérusalem*, the composer is “overly cautious” in his treatment of French prosody and rarely presents “typically French passages” (p. 105). Although he examines “O mes amis” of Gaston’s aria of Act III as an exceptional exhibition of a blend of nuanced French elements—including the rhythms adapted to the text’s *octosyllabes*, an enriched harmonic vocabulary, and the introduction of a second melody after only four verses—he ultimately characterizes the passage as more Italian than French. He speculates that the tripartite structures of “thematic blocks” (or beginnings of lyrical sections) in Verdi’s works after *Jérusalem* likely represent a French trait, but then rejects the possibility that the opera served as a source for this development. In his brief discussion, in fact, Giger implies that the opera as a whole could only barely be classified as French, one with few melodic innovations and little “French” influence on the composer’s subsequent operas.

Les Vêpres siciliennes represents another case entirely, and Giger argues that it “marks a great step forward in assimilating French aesthetics” (p. 181). Not only did Verdi begin to use French prosody rhetorically, or “as a dramatic tool” (p. 125), as in his use of scanning against tonic accents to produce a “lighthearted” effect, he also created new rhythmic solutions to accommodate irregular accents, as in his setting of *octosyllabes* “with predominately neutral note values over a metrically weak accompaniment” in the Act II duet of Hélène and Henri (p. 126). Giger considers several settings of irregularly accented texts, noting that Verdi often mixed prosodic approaches, repeated text, shifted middleground rhythm, and drew more frequently upon durational accents to produce varied melodic designs. In *Vêpres*, Verdi began to follow the French manner of constructing a “chain of distinct melodies,” which accommodate the different poetic meters in a series of stanzas (p. 143) but also reflect changes of emotion or mood, as Giger shows in Hélène’s Act I aria, “Viens à nous, Dieu tutélaire,” and Hélène’s and Henri’s Act II duet. Other newly assimilated French approaches, including contrasting melodies, varied thematic blocks, metric ambiguity, enriched harmonies, and non-formulaic accompaniments that change and intensify as the drama dictates, can also be found in parts of *Simon Boccanegra* (1857), *Un ballo in maschera* (1859), *La forza del destino* (1862), as well as in Lady Macbeth’s new aria “La luce langue” for his 1865 revision of *Macbeth* for the Opéra.

Yet, as Giger underscores in the final chapter, Verdi revealed his assimilation of French prosodic and melodic practices with even greater refinement in *Don Carlos* (1867). Surmising that Verdi by this time had fully accepted the French manner “without objection” (p. 184), he finds aspects of the composer’s French approaches more pronounced than in *Vêpres*, including metric ambiguity and even more varied accentuation, phrase structure, middleground rhythm, harmonic choices, and accompaniments. Partly in response to the greater abundance of alexandrines and polymetric stanzas in *Don Carlos*, Verdi dealt with a great amount of accentual irregularity with diverse prosodic approaches and created “melodies of unsurpassed naturalness, dramatic accuracy, and beauty” (p. 194) as well as effective declamatory treatment. He extended the “chaining” of melodies, setting non-stanzaic verse within the melodic flow and reflecting shifting affects. As Giger points out, critics such as Théophile Gautier spoke of Verdi’s

increased use of “declamatory mélopée” in lieu of recitative and the dovetailing of arias into mélopées, likening his procedures to Wagner’s—a comparison that Giger addresses but essentially dismisses, instead viewing Verdi’s melodic style as an “amplification” of his already assimilated French manner.

At the end of the book, the author briefly considers the effects that Verdi’s French style had on his late operas. He points for example to the succession of melodies in the Act I aria of *Aida* (1871) and speculates that French aesthetics inspired the opera’s “harmonic sophistication” as well as the often-discussed ballet and staging (p. 215). He suggests that the more continuous melodic style of *Don Carlos* led to an even more continuous treatment in *Otello* (1887) in which Boito’s rhythmically and metrically varied verses helped further to break down “the boundaries between aria texture, *parlante*, and recitative” (p. 217). He hesitates, however, to claim a direct French influence on the melodic-dramatic style of *Otello* and *Falstaff*, and briefly notes that the composer may also have absorbed French influences indirectly in modified forms through the works of Boito, Wagner, and Puccini.

Although Giger’s illumination of French influences on Verdian practice is truly admirable, one might have hoped for a greater reliance on music examples from the French repertoire (beyond those offered in Chapter two), more frequent references to librettists (libretto excerpts appear without librettists’ names), and a realistic recognition of the potential difficulties of linking theory and practice. Although he hints that theory often follows practice, or that composers’ prosodic solutions rarely fit any one theorist’s prescriptions, he more strongly implies that practice consistently depended on, or perhaps anticipated theory in his discussion of Verdi’s operas. He repeatedly claims that Verdi followed “the manner of” a particular theorist or theorists (even if the treatises appeared well after the time of an opera, as noted above), for example, as in the subsequent statements: “Verdi [in *Vêpres*] began to reflect irregular rhythmic groups in the manner of Lubarsch [1879] and Landry [1911]” (p. 129); or “the composer [in *Don Carlos*] fulfills Paul Pierson’s expectations [as presented in a treatise of 1884] that the music should reflect not only Lubarsch and Landry’s obligatory accents but also their secondary ones” (p. 188). At times descriptions of Verdi’s diverse prosodic treatment boggle the mind—for example, when Giger refers to six different theories guiding, or corresponding to, Verdi’s setting in the first nine measures of “Dans ce beau pays” of *Don Carlos* (p. 199).

The book is generally cleanly presented, although occasional typographical or printing errors do appear. Elucidating the discussions throughout are many music examples, columns of juxtaposed texts comparing Verdi’s (or other composers’) accentuations to those endorsed by particular theorists, and a variety of tables. Although the music examples are well chosen, a consistent use of clarifying editorial marks, such as brackets and chord symbols, would have enhanced their connection to the discussion. Moreover, a guide to the tables would have been helpful, and there could have been a greater connection between the tables of Verdi’s varied types of thematic blocks and the author’s descriptions—many categories included in these were not fully addressed or referenced in the main text.

Despite these mostly minor oversights, Giger’s *Verdi and the French Aesthetic* represents an important achievement in the scholarship of French and Italian opera of the nineteenth century, and of Verdi in particular. Well-documented and offering a thoughtful interpretation of the subject matter, the book adds many new insights, not only into significant aspects of Verdi’s French manner and his development as a whole, but also into important distinctions between French and Italian aesthetics and practices. Through meticulous examination of French prosodic theories and applications to librettos and musical settings, Giger has deepened and refined our knowledge of intricate interrelationships among text, music, and drama in nineteenth-century opera. His study provides much food for thought, and it will certainly inspire other scholars to explore ways in which Verdi’s French prosodic-melodic treatment may have intertwined with more frequently discussed aspects of the composer’s art—for instance, his transformations of Rossinian prototypes (which Giger addresses, but rather indirectly). It offers solid bases for more extensive comparisons of Verdi’s middle to late works with a wider range of French and Italian operas, prosodic-melodic considerations in understudied repertoire (particularly of comparatively

neglected French operas), and further clarifications of the complex French-Italian interchanges in nineteenth-century opera.

[1] Emilio Sala, "Verdi and the Parisian Boulevard Theatre, 1847-49," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7, no. 3 (1995): 185-205.

[2] Giger draws upon important studies of Italian and French prosody and versification, for example, Friedrich Lippmann's "Der italienische Vers und der musikalische Rhythmus: Zum Verhältnis von Vers und Musik in der italienischen Oper des 19. Jahrhunderts, mit einem Rückblick auf die 2. Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Analecta musicologica* 12 (1973): 253-369; 14 (1974): 324-410; 15 (1975): 298-333. His work intersects with other considerations of the setting and influence of French verse in Verdi's operas, such as Jeffrey Langford, "Text Setting in Verdi's *Jérusalem* and *Don Carlos*," *Verdi Newsletter*, no. 12 (1984): 19-31, and "Poetic Prosody and Melodic Rhythm in *Les Vêpres siciliennes*," *Verdi Newsletter*, no. 23 (1996): 8-18; Damien Colas, "Quels accents! quel langage!": Examen du traitement de l'alexandrin dans *Les Vêpres siciliennes*," in *L'opéra en France et en Italie (1791-1925): Une scène privilégiée d'échanges littéraires et musicaux*, ed. Hervé Lacombe, Publications de la Société française de musicologie, III/8 (Paris: Société française de musicologie, 2000), 187-214; and Pierluigi Petrobelli, "De l'alexandrin à l'anapeste chez Verdi: Structure poétique et composition musicale dans *Un ballo in maschera*," in *L'opéra en France et en Italie (1791-1925)*, 215-22. However, as pointed out below, Giger builds his arguments on a stronger foundation of 19th- and early 20th-century theoretical treatises on French prosody and versification than these authors consider. His discussion benefits from, and sometimes challenges, a wide range of Verdi scholarship, including Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, rev. ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Joseph Kerman, "Lyric Form and Flexibility in *Simon Boccanegra*," *Studi verdiani* 1 (1982): 55-57; Kathleen Kuzmick Hansell, "Compositional Techniques in *Stiffelio*: Reading the Autograph Sources," in *Verdi's Middle Period, 1849-1859: Source Studies, Analysis, and Performance Practice*, ed. Martin Chusid (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 45-97; David Lawton, "Le trouvère: Verdi's Revision of *Il trovatore* for Paris," *Studi verdiani* 3 (1985): 79-119; and David Rosen and Andrew Porter, *Verdi's Macbeth: A Sourcebook* (New York: Norton, 1984).

[3] See Andreas Giger, "Defining Stanzaic Structure in Verdi's French Librettos and the Implications for the Musical Setting," *Acta musicologica* 73, no. 2 (2001): 141-63; "Reconsidering *Les Vêpres siciliennes* in the Context of French Aesthetic Thought," in *Verdi 2001: Atti del Convegno internazionale / Proceedings of the International Conference (Parma — New York — New Haven, 24 January–1 February 2001)*, ed. Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Montemorra Marvin, and Marco Marica, 2 vols. (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2003), 519-43; "The Triumph of Diversity: Theories of French Accentuation and Their Influence on Verdi's French Operas," *Music and Letters* 84, no. 1 (Feb. 2003): 55-83; "French Influences," in *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 111-38.

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