

## Noise and Silence in *Rigoletto's* Venice

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**Abstract:** In this article I explore how public acts of defiant silence can work as forms of historical evidence, and how such refusals constitute a distinct mode of audio-visual attention and political resistance. After the Austrians reconquered Venice in August 1849, multiple observers reported that Venetians protested their renewed subjugation via theatre boycotts (both formal and informal) and a refusal to participate in festive occasions. The ostentatious public silences that met the daily Austrian military band concerts in the city's central piazza became a ritual that encouraged foreign observers to empathise with the Venetians' plight. Whereas the gondolier's song seemed to travel separate from the gondolier himself, the piazza's design instead encouraged a communal listening coloured by the politics of the local cafes. In the central section of the article, I explore the ramifications of silence, resistance and disconnections between sight and sound as they shape Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*, which premiered at Venice's Teatro la Fenice in 1851. The scenes in *Rigoletto* most appreciated by the first Venetian audiences hinge on the power to observe and overhear, suggesting that early spectators experienced the opera through a mode of engagement born of the local material conditions and political circumstances.

On 30 August 1849, the Austrian Field Marshal Joseph von Radetzky entered Venice, marking the end of the 1848 Revolutions in the Italian peninsula. According to the *Gazzetta di Venezia*, cannons began announcing the field marshal's arrival at nine in the morning, the booms sounding closer and closer to the city as first Forte Marghera on the mainland and then the island of San Secondo celebrated his approach.<sup>1</sup> Grateful citizens hung damask carpets and draperies from their windows to fête the conquering hero as he processed down the Grand Canal, greeting him with waving handkerchiefs and shouted acclamations as church bells pealed across the city. When the procession of gondolas arrived at Piazza San Marco and Radetzky disembarked, the warships anchored in port celebrated with more cannon blasts as the bells of the Basilica of San Marco tolled their own welcome. Military bands played the Austrian anthem during the review of troops, after which the field marshal entered the Basilica to hear Mass. The Venetian Patriarch's blessing wedded the desires of church to state once more, a symbolic marriage witnessed by ecclesiastical, military, civic and municipal functionaries.

But let us reconsider this description if, as instead reported by the British consul stationed in Venice at the time, during the procession 'perfect silence was maintained,

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<sup>1</sup> *Gazzetta di Venezia* (31 August 1849).

scarcely any of the inhabitants appearing at the windows'.<sup>2</sup> Without the acclamations from spectators, Radetzky's triumphal march begins to sound more like a dirge for reconquered Venice. The consul, Clinton Dawkins, observed that the windows were in fact decorated, but this is unsurprising since the Austrian government had threatened a fine of sixty *zwanzigers* if the windows of the *palazzi* along the canal went bare.<sup>3</sup> In hanging their carpets, the silent Venetians artfully dodged the legal requirements of celebration.

As the representative of a rival empire, the British consul may be accused of passing along a partisan fantasy, except that neither Dawkins nor his government had supported the revolutionary Republic of San Marco. Marooned in the city during the long Habsburg siege, Dawkins may have instead acquired a sense of fraternity engendered by the communal suffering: denizens were left hungry and in the dark as food and oil stores dwindled, with conditions deteriorating to the point that a cholera epidemic broke out right before the Venetians surrendered. Note, the sympathetic slippage in Dawkins's account between a literal silence and the metaphorical silencing of a political body. Reliant as we are on sources like this we are unlikely to confirm whether the Venetians were in fact silent during Radetzky's entrance, but this historical impasse can lead to productive considerations about the biases of historical listeners such as Dawkins.

In what follows, I shall engage this silence and others like it as an invitation to think about silence as a form of evidence. Jumping off from the initial conundrum posed by Dawkins's report, I want to attend to how people listened in public spaces – including the opera house and inside the fictional world of opera – in Venice in the months after the Habsburg reconquest of 1849. Recent scholarship on sound and war suggests that we might hear this silence as evidence of trauma inflicted by the Habsburg counter-revolution.<sup>4</sup> Such an interpretation risks further withdrawing agency from Venetians and reassigning it to bombs and disease.<sup>5</sup> Silence, after all, can be chosen. Yet my aim is not to envoice the Venetians, since that would seem

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in G.M. Trevelyan, *Manin and the Venetian Revolution of 1848* (London, 1923), 240–1, emphasis mine. For more on Dawkins, see Paul Ginsborg, *Daniele Manin and the Venetian Revolution of 1848–49* (Cambridge, 1979), 352; Harry Hearder, 'La rivoluzione veneziana del 1848 vista dal console generale inglese', *Rassegna storica del Risorgimento* 46 (1957), 734–41.

<sup>3</sup> The government's official mouthpiece, the *Gazzetta di Venezia*, confirmed this on 16 September when responding to a report on Radetzky's procession published 1 September in the Genoese newspaper *Bandiera del popolo*. The Austrians forced the Venetians' hand in part by levying punitive taxes in Austrian currency, which the Venetians had abandoned, so they could not afford to pay the fines. On the various new taxes implemented after 1848, see William A. Jenks, *Francis Joseph and the Italians, 1849–1859* (Charlottesville, VA, 1978), 37–8. For an (Austrian-friendly) overview of the pre-1848 economy in Lombardy-Venetia, see Marco Meriggi, *Il Regno Lombardo-Veneto* (Turin, 1987), 215–37.

<sup>4</sup> On wartime sound and listening, see J. Martin Daughtry, 'Thanatosonics: Ontologies of Acoustic Violence', *Social Text* 32 (2014), 25–51; Jim Sykes, 'Ontologies of Acoustic Endurance: Rethinking Wartime Sound and Listening', *Sound Studies* 4 (2018), 35–60.

<sup>5</sup> Lauren Berlant, 'History and the Affective Event', *American Literary History* 20 (2008), 845–60.

to betray their preference for a stance of passive resistance in the face of discourses imposed by the Habsburg Empire.<sup>6</sup>

When Radetzky set foot on Venetian ground that day in August 1849, he was not only marking a local victory, but also celebrating the successful end of a campaign to keep Lombardy-Venetia part of a now-resurgent Empire. In Austria, where the young Emperor Franz Joseph dressed in military uniforms and concerned himself with a neo-absolutist renewal of court pomp and celebration, citizens monumentalised *Vater* Radetzky with statues, odes and, most famously, the march by Johann Strauss Sr that bears his name.<sup>7</sup> Earlier in 1848 Venetian newspapers had condemned Radetzky as a modern barbarian, the contemporary incarnation of Attila the Hun and Genseric; now he and his men were in charge.<sup>8</sup> The flood of troops into the Piazza San Marco for Radetzky's review was only one of many facets of the Habsburg domination of Venetian public spaces, in the years just before and just after 1848. In filling those spaces with processions, spectacle and performances, the Habsburg administration tried to dictate the sensory experiences available to residents – not only by controlling physical access to piazzas and waterways, but also by determining how they were lit and what music was heard, and even shaping sensory details such as how things smelled, what papers were read in cafes and what currency jingled in people's pockets.<sup>9</sup> I will pay particular attention the various listening practices cultivated in those urban spaces where Venetians and Austrians were expected to interact – or where Venetians were expected to conform to Habsburg standards.

Any history of the Venetian ear in this period must take seriously the idea – as we saw with Dawkins's account – that listening could be a public act, meaning one in

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Brown, 'Freedom's Silences', in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, 2005), 83–97.

<sup>7</sup> On Franz Joseph, see Daniel L. Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism: Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Vienna, 1848–1916* (West Lafayette, IN, 2005), 17–19; Laurence Cole, *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford, 2014), 34–41; and Peter Urbanitsch, 'Pluralist Myth and Nationalist Realities: The Dynastic Myth of the Habsburg Monarchy – A Futile Exercise in the Creation of Identity?', *Austrian History Yearbook* 35 (2004), 101–41. For an extensive exploration of monuments (both material and cultural) to Radetzky after 1848, see Cole, *Military Culture*, 67–107. On the *March*, see Zoë Lang, 'The Regime's "Musical Weapon" Transformed: The Reception of Johann Strauss Sr.'s *Radetzky March* Before and After the First World War', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 134 (2009), 243–69.

<sup>8</sup> *Il libero italiano* (31 March 1848) and *L'indipendente* (15 April 1848). Following his surprising retreat from Milan after the famous five days of street fighting in March 1848, newspapers published descriptions of Austrian atrocities purportedly uncovered by the Milanese, including the brutal murder and mutilation of malnourished prisoners as well as the horrendous sight of dead children pierced by bayonets, their bodies primed for a gruesome procession around the region. The fullest contemporary account appears in *Raccolta delle atrocità commesse dagli austriaci durante la rivoluzione di Milano* (Turin, 1848). The newspaper accounts closely resemble that in the *Raccolta*, suggesting, if not historical accuracy, at least a swift standardisation of mythology.

<sup>9</sup> Jenks, *Francis Joseph*, 51–6. For a history of earlier policing practices in Venice, see David Laven, 'Law and Order in Habsburg Venetia, 1814–1835', *The Historical Journal* 39 (1996), 383–403. Laven argues that censorship was always an area in which the Habsburgs tended to overdo things, but in many other ways they efficiently wielded the centralised bureaucracy to monitor good governance in cities such as Venice.

which it was necessary for the act of listening *to be seen*.<sup>10</sup> A crucial moment in this history, I argue, was the premiere of Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* in March 1851, when international attention was focused on the opera's reception by the reconquered Venetians.<sup>11</sup> While the fact of *Rigoletto's* immediate acclaim has long been central to Verdi historiography, my research shows how the public's rapid embrace of the work was enmeshed with local politics – not the nationalistic, patriotic politics of the Risorgimento, but rather the messier politics of day-to-day living in a mid-nineteenth-century Italian city. The sonic world of Italian opera, both on and off the stage, is an archive that has not yet been explored from the perspective of sound studies. In this article, I place the operatic archive and the archive of local urban sounds together: first by reconstructing the historical Venetian soundscape and considering its implications, then by listening for the 'sound' of the city as conveyed through music criticism, and finally by proposing the operatic soundworld of *Rigoletto* itself as a kind of soundscape – one steeped in historic listening stances.

### The gondolier's cry

The perception of Venetian silence was not a simple symptom of imperial politics, since many visitors displaced from the industrial bustle of London or Paris were struck by the city's preternatural quiet. During her stay there in the early part of the 1840s, Mary Shelley noted that there was 'no noise' at all in Venice – save for the ringing of church bells, which were in fact 'too much' – and that silence became 'superlative stillness' as tourists reached the outlying islands of Murano and Burano.<sup>12</sup> As Shelley herself was aware, this was a soundscape constructed through cultural comparisons: heard from the vantage point of European modernity, Venice's silence marked it as prehistoric.

Part of Venice's pre- and post-1848 draw for visitors was its anachronistic stillness, engendered by the difficulties posed by its unique landscape. Venice is a winding canal city built atop a watery forest of petrified tree trunks placed by enterprising fishermen. Caught between the powerful exhalation of the Po River and the forceful tides of the Adriatic Sea, the Venetians cultivated a harmonious relationship with the

<sup>10</sup> Although Jonathan Sterne positions the history of sound as providing 'some of the best evidence for a dynamic history of the body' (13), he limits this largely to hearing and hearing alone, in relation to the development in the nineteenth century of new technologies that separated hearing from the other senses. See Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC, 2003), 1–29.

<sup>11</sup> For a documentary account of *Rigoletto's* genesis, see Marcello Conati, *La bottega della musica: Verdi e La Fenice* (Milan, 1983). See also Mary Phillips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography* (Oxford, 1993), 263–87; and Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1992), I: 477–84.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Shelley, *Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842, and 1843*, 2 vols. (London, 1844), II: 101. In a series of meditative vignettes on the possibilities of researching an 'Italian sound', Hillel Schwartz quotes Henry James making a similar comparison later in the century between Florence and New York. Sketching the concept of an Italian soundscape constructed relationally, Schwartz similarly highlights problems of cultural difference as well as historic specificity. See Hillel Schwartz, 'Fifth Elements: A Research Program in Italian Sound', *California Italian Studies* 4 (2013), 12–14, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/152841mv>.

environment around them: a cultivation epitomised by the annual marriage to the sea, when the Doge would toss a consecrated ring into the waters and declare city and sea forever wed. The calm rocking of the city's most famous form of transportation – the gondola – was heralded as medicinal, enticing the traveller into a state of surreal somnolence.<sup>13</sup> The gondolier's famous song further lulled the weary passenger to sleep, although it was in reality no song at all, more a half-sung, half-spoken recitation of poetry by writers such as Torquato Tasso.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the city was an oasis, unmoored from both mainland and modernity.

While this perception played into stereotypes of the *dolce far niente* attitude supposedly endemic to Italy, the Habsburgs supported the modernisation of the city's infrastructure, most famously the railway bridge that connected the city to the mainland, completed in 1846. At the same time, the competing global narrative of nineteenth-century industrialisation redefined Venice's relationship with its waters by displacing administrative care of the lagoons to landlocked cities such as Vienna or (eventually) Rome, a displacement that in the twentieth century led to the coastal groundwater pumping primarily responsible for the rises in water levels that in the contemporary moment allow for the illusion that the city is 'sinking'.<sup>15</sup> Nineteenth-century observers, however, were more familiar with isolationist narratives of stubborn Venetian self-dependency, underlining the proud people's willingness to founder rather than reconnect with the outside world.

This last point comes from the modern strand of the mythology known as the *legenda nera* or 'black legend' of Venice, which stressed the decadence, tyranny and corruption of the Venetian Republic, stretching back for centuries. Following this devil-may-care decadence of the last centuries, Venetians supposedly required intervention from a more benevolent foreign government: in this case the 'liberal' Habsburgs. By the 1840s there were decades' worth of tales that fetishised the unveiling of the labyrinthine conspiracies supposedly rampant in the old Republic, a mania that filtered into popular culture as an obsession with masks, assassins and

<sup>13</sup> *Venezia e le sue lagune*, 3 vols. (Venice, 1847), II.1: 306. Later in the 1850s Venice became a site of medical tourism, which brought so many people into the city during the summer months that the Teatro La Fenice started a summer season. On this summer season, see, for example, *L'Italia musicale* (30 July 1856) and *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* (27 July 1856).

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Shelley's description in *Rambles*, II: 125–6. Not unlike Dawkins, Lord Byron first claimed in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* that after the fall of the Republic of Venice in 1797 'Tasso's echoes are no more, / And silent rows the songless gondolier'. Yet in the accompanying notes, the editor recalls a recent gondola ride in which he and Byron were serenaded by a gondolier and a carpenter, during which the carpenter connected the lack of memorisation to a lack of time and resources: '[L]ook at my clothes and at me, I am starving.' See George Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Canto the fourth* (London, 1818), 103–11.

<sup>15</sup> Serenella Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (London, 2016), 51–2; Luigi Tosi, Pietro Teatini and Tazio Strozzi, 'Natural Versus Anthropogenic Subsidence of Venice', *Scientific Reports* 3, 2710 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep02710>. For more on the 'age of water' beginning in the fifteenth century, see Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, 'An Ecological Understanding of the Myth of Venice', in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797*, ed. John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore, MD, 2000), 39–64. On Venetian isolation, see Peter Burke, 'Early Modern Venice as a Center of Information and Communication', in *Venice Reconsidered*, 389–419.

convoluted political machinations.<sup>16</sup> The exaggerated Venetian settings of Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833) and *Marino Faliero* (1835), and Verdi's *I due Foscari* (1844), all drew on sources influenced by this strand of historiography.<sup>17</sup> In resurrecting such historical narratives, Franz Joseph's spectacular neo-absolutism made clear the progress of the present regime, and the Habsburgs sought to turn Venice into a permanent exhibition of Austrian progress.<sup>18</sup>

While these seem to be two competing historical impulses – preservation and modernisation – their common ground was the sense of Venice as an ecosystem, in which citizens were cast as *part of* their environment.<sup>19</sup> Venetians were heard as silent in part because Venice itself was heard as silent. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than with the treatment of the gondolier in both music and literature. The gondolier exerted himself to carry visitors to the city and ferry them around the canals within, yet most listeners are more familiar with his leisurely pace in the musical genre inspired by his song: the barcarolle. Rather than depict the gondolier's muscular mastery of the waters, with its lulling 6/8 time the barcarolle's accompaniment mimicked the gentle rocking of a boat, and its melody translated his speech-song into a melancholy tune. The barcarolle, in other words, transformed the active into the passive – or the cultured into the folk – by emphasising the dreamy influence this silence had on the foreign listener.<sup>20</sup> When Richard Wagner visited the city in 1858, he declared the gondolier's song impossible to transcribe:

Suddenly [the gondolier] uttered a deep wail, not unlike the cry of an animal; the cry gradually gained in strength and formed itself, after a long-drawn 'Oh!' into a simple musical exclamation 'Venezia!' This was followed by other sounds of which I have no distinct recollection, as I was so moved at the time.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> On Venetian historiography during this period, see David Barnes, 'Historicizing the Stones: Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* and Italian Nationalism', *Comparative Literature* 62 (2010), 246–61, and Filippo de Vivo, 'Quand le passé résiste à ses historiographies: Venise et le XVIIe siècle', *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherche Historiques* 28–9 (2002), <http://journals.openedition.org/ccrh/1122>. Many historians have turned to the nineteenth-century French historian Pierre Daru as a primary source of this version of the *leggenda nera*, followed closely by Lord Byron. See David Laven, 'Lord Byron, Count Daru, and Anglophone Myths of Venice in the Nineteenth Century', *MDCC* 1 (2012), 5–32; Claudio Povoletto, 'The Creation of Venetian Historiography', in *Venice Reconsidered*, 491–519. Daru's Napoleonic allegiances and wartime Italian interests bore surprising musical fruit: he brought with him his young cousin, Stendhal.

<sup>17</sup> On the history of masks in Venice, see James Johnson, *Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic* (Berkeley, CA, 2011). Johnson tackles nineteenth-century operas with Venetian settings in 'The Myth of Venice in Nineteenth-Century Opera', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36 (2006), 533–54.

<sup>18</sup> Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', *new formations* 4 (1988), 73–102.

<sup>19</sup> See Steven Feld, 'Acoustemology', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC, 2008), 12–21; and Ari Y. Kelman, 'Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies', *The Senses and Society* 5 (2010), 212–34.

<sup>20</sup> See a similar example in Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC, 2014), 32–75. In their wordlessness or general incomprehensibility to foreigners, I believe the gondoliers' songs distinguish themselves from the (European) democratised and radicalised 'natural' language discussed by Francesca Brittan in *Music and Fantasy in the Age of Berlioz* (Cambridge, 2017), 141–9.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Wagner, *My Life*, 2 vols. (New York, 1911), II: 697.

It is difficult to believe that at no point during his stay did Wagner manage to gather himself enough to transcribe the cry, yet this particular *enchantment* to the sound – and the accompanying loss of one’s sense of self – was by that point a Venetian trope, and in all likelihood Wagner exaggerated both the incident and its effect to conform to the genre of the travelogue.

During the 1850s one figure worked to correct this fantasising impulse, even as he embraced what he thought beautiful in the city: the English art critic John Ruskin. In an appendix to the second volume (1853) of *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin took on the role of amateur ethnographer and described the ‘peculiarly characteristic’ cries of the gondolier, in part to rectify a common misunderstanding. Ruskin explained that a gondolier calling out ‘Premi, premi-è!’ from around the corner was announcing his attention to make a left turn. On hearing his call, gondoliers in oncoming traffic would shift their oars back to turn to *their* right in order to give room to the gondolier making his left turn. Listening only from their own vantages in the gondolas, foreign tourists were comically mistranslating ‘premi’ to mean a move to the right rather than correctly hearing it as the forewarning of a left turn. The mistranslation that Ruskin corrected is a tiny detail, but perhaps emblematic of such encounters between Venetians and outsiders.<sup>22</sup>

The lack of Venetian articulation highlighted – for different purposes – in both Ruskin’s and Wagner’s accounts suggests the animalistic howls of the colonial archive, which blurred boundaries between speech and song, and human and nature. In other words, visitors listened to the gondolier’s cries as if he were an exotic Other, robbing him of any proper expression of Western subjectivity – the expectation most often embedded in the concept of ‘having a voice’. With a wider focus, such dehumanisation fits neatly within existing discourses on both sides that lamented Italian degeneration, whose rate of change – depending on who the speaker was – accelerated or slowed in response to foreign domination.<sup>23</sup> By reacting to their environment rather than shaping it, Italians proved themselves in need of policing.

This assertion that Italians were in need of the steady guidance of ‘paternalistic’ Austria is recognisable as classic imperialist logic, yet one accruing new value in recent Habsburg revisionist histories. Historians such as Pieter Judson and David Laven have emphasised how the Empire’s efficient, centralised administration favoured the local peoples in making sure to stamp out any petty tyrants threatening to kindle conflicts. By promoting healthy bureaucracies, the thinking goes, the Empire in fact fostered the eventual emergence of independent states.<sup>24</sup> In the

<sup>22</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 3 vols. (London, 1853), II: 375–7. For more on Ruskin and Venice, see Jennifer Scappetone, *Killing the Moonlight: Modernism in Venice* (New York, 2014), 43–86.

<sup>23</sup> See Silvana Patriarca, *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (Cambridge, 2010). Giovanni Prati makes similar assertions in the preface to his *Nuovi versi* (Venice, 1848).

<sup>24</sup> Most significant is Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA, 2016). For sources on and interpretation of Italian events, Judson relies almost exclusively on the Habsburg-friendly David Laven and Alan Sked. Laven’s referenced work in Judson is on Venice before 1848: the aforementioned Laven, ‘Law and Order’, but see also David Laven, *Venice and Venetia Under the Habsburgs, 1815–1835* (Oxford, 2002). On the revolutions in Milan and Venice,

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Italian context Habsburg revisionism works against what was once an unshakeable nationalist Italian historiography, albeit one that had crumbled under the pressure of Antonio Gramsci's famous critique of the Italian *Risorgimento* as a 'passive revolution' that established a top-heavy cultural hegemony. In combatting what can appear as Italian propaganda, these historians risk reinscribing the idea that Italians were – and still are – particularly susceptible to a contagion spread by ill-intentioned revolutionaries, a susceptibility that can also seem to infect historians of Italy, who can be accused of partiality.

My aim is not to come down on one side or the other of a historic political struggle, but rather to highlight the ways in which such imperialist listenings colour our understanding of Italy and Italians even in contemporary scholarship. We still listen to Italians in this period much as tourists and visitors listened to the gondoliers – entrenched in their environment and without agency.

### The Venetian ear

Within a few months in 1850 and 1851, two events occurred that brought international attention to the contours of the Venetian ear: the Belgian critic François-Joseph Fétis published a two-part article on the state of modern Italian music (meaning opera), and Verdi's *Rigoletto* received its first performances, at Venice's Teatro La Fenice in March of 1851. *Rigoletto* represented a triumph for Verdi, and its near-immediate popularity around Europe would soon become a point of pride for Venetians.<sup>25</sup> This pride, and local critics' attendant worries that

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Judson references Alan Sked, *Radetzky: Imperial Victor and Military Genius* (London, 2011), 134. Sked's project is unabashedly recuperative: as a corrective effort he often takes Radetzky's point of view to the extreme at the expense of the Italians. In wanting to portray Radetzky as a 'military genius', however, Sked details the deteriorating relationship between Austrians and Italians in Italy in the later 1840s in order to show how Radetzky anticipated the 1848 revolutions – in the face of administrative inaction and incompetence – and therefore makes a point that contradicts Laven's more sceptical readings of Italian tensions. Sked, in turn, notes that Italian revolutionaries paid 'scant attention to reality' in ignoring that the Habsburg administration was 'less oppressive than in most Italian states', but the original reference is Laven on the 'age of restoration' (again, *before* 1848) in *Italy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. John A. Davis (Oxford, 2001), 58–9. The somewhat circular nature of all these references – centring Laven – suggests that the seeming Anglophone consensus on both Italy and Venice during this period deserves further scrutiny.

<sup>25</sup> Outside of Italy, *Rigoletto* premiered in Vienna in May 1852 (*Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 23 May 1852), Budapest in December 1852 (*Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 16 January 1853), Corfu in December 1852 (*L'Italia musicale*, 29 January 1853), Saint Petersburg in March 1853 (*L'Italia musicale*, 12 March 1853), London in May 1853 (*The Musical World*, 21 May 1853), Barcelona in (presumably) January 1854 (*L'Italia musicale*, 1 February 1854), Lisbon in (presumably) February 1854 (*L'Italia musicale*, 22 February 1854), Bucharest in February 1854 (*Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 2 April 1854), Odessa in early summer 1854 (*L'Italia musicale*, 5 July 1854), Tbilisi in autumn 1854 (*L'Italia musicale*, 15 November 1854) and New York in February 1855 (*The Musical Gazette*, 17 February 1855). Paris is noticeably absent from this list, in part because Victor Hugo objected that in adapting his *Le roi s'amuse* the opera infringed on his rights. He even went so far as to pursue a ban on performances when *Rigoletto* premiered at the Théâtre Italien in 1857 (see *La revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, 18 January 1857 and 1 February 1857). The case attracted considerable attention in the Italian papers (see, for example, *Gazzetta musicale di Napoli*, 7 and 14 February 1857).



if they misjudged the work they might appear misguided to outsiders, highlights the difficulty of reading the local press, at least in a place such as Venice. Just as the silence of the canals was registered by visitors to the city, who compared it to industrial European cities, so too did Venetians listen to local premieres with those northerly operatic capitals in mind. Music criticism is often understood as hyper-local, and Italian operatic criticism in particular is seen as a receptacle of sublimated urban politics, wherein discussions censored elsewhere were enacted via interpretations of operatic plots, devices and effects.<sup>26</sup> The entanglement of opera and city meant that through criticism local discourses could circulate far beyond their city of origin; but this also meant, from the opposite point of view, that local critics could absorb and disseminate ideas from elsewhere. A local review of a local performance, then, could sometimes be a reflection of or a response to foreign ideas.

Writing from Venice at the end of 1850, Fétis excoriated Italians for what he called the decline of their musical tastes, pointing in particular to Verdi as representative of everything wrong with Italian music. Particularly riling – and inexplicable – for Fétis was how Italian audiences had managed to renounce their natural penchant for melody in favour of Verdi's derivative noisiness. He scoffed:

What could have changed the Italian nature to such a point that the noise that was completely contrary to its genius is now exactly what it loves; for whom an orchestra of ninety parts is not enough, and still needs to add the clamour of one or two military bands with their cortege of trombones, tubas, and bass drums – does the presence of these bands on stage overturn good sense?

In the article, however, Fétis answered his own question: revolutionary sentiments had so wound up the Italians over the course of twenty-five years that they needed to see their own heightened, violent emotions reflected on stage, translated into sound as excess and noise. When the noise was orchestral, that excess was symbolised by military bands; when it was vocal, Fétis and many others resorted to a lexicon of 'shouts and screams', decrying a soundworld in which the 'force of the lungs' replaced the Italian 'art of singing'.<sup>27</sup> On the surface, concerns about operatic noise and excess might appear as the opposite of the silence and accompanying lack of agency I discussed in the previous section, but I would argue that they are in fact closely related. Both point to a gap in Italian articulation, where inclination towards excess overwhelmed the listener's ability to hear the Italian voice in the city as well as in the opera house, rendering it not unheard but indecipherable.

Fétis was not the first to condemn Italian opera for its noisiness, nor was he the first to link operatic noise to political upheavals. Whereas decades earlier critics had

<sup>26</sup> On the relationship between Italian opera, criticism and the city, see Emanuele Senici, 'Delirious Hopes: Napoleonic Milan and the Rise of Modern Italian Operatic Criticism', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 27 (2015), 97–127.

<sup>27</sup> *L'Italia musicale* (10 September 1850). Guido Salvetti discusses Fétis's articles in relation to other Verdi detractors in Guido Salvetti, "'Ho detto male... di Verdi.'" Saggio di ricezione negative', *Rivista italiana di musicologia* 48 (2013), 105–41.

grappled with the idea that the nervous excitement of Rossini's orchestral noise threatened revolutionary agitation, Fétis's concerns seem less about action and more about inaction.<sup>28</sup> As proof of the Italians' disinterest in developing the art, Fétis pointed to Italy's empty theatres, including La Fenice, which had come close to cancelling the 1850–51 season until the Austrian government intervened to provide the necessary funding. His reading of Italian passivity opens into broader discourses of the Italian revolutions as theatrical spectacles themselves, which, while possibly encouraging widespread participation, also invited accusations of political insincerity.<sup>29</sup> Instead of concentrating on the kinds of progress necessary to demonstrate their ability to self-represent, in other words, Italians were fighting for the emotional thrill of singing together in the streets.

This very issue of the need and desire for excited stimulation was one discussed throughout Italy in the context of *Rigoletto*, which premiered only months after Fétis's condemnation of Verdi and did itself no immediate favours by featuring a plot in which the title character schemes to murder his employer. It was furthermore a common criticism that Venetians in particular tended towards the moribund and therefore required exaggerated entertainments to stimulate them. In 1823, for instance, Stendhal had painted a bleak picture, describing Venice as a place in which 'everyone is slowly dying of boredom' and in such an environment, '[a grotesque satire] has all the impact of startling originality'.<sup>30</sup> After the premiere, critics fretted that some of the shocking aspects of the plot – especially the murder of Rigoletto's daughter, Gilda, at the very end of the opera – promised to elicit a terrible *frisson* that would attract audiences for all the wrong reasons.<sup>31</sup> The critic for the *Gazzetta ufficiale di Venezia*, Tommaso Locatelli, opened his first review of *Rigoletto* with a warning that Verdi and librettist Francesco Maria Piave 'searched for the beautiful ideal in the deformed, the horrible' and that they wielded effect not for the education of the soul, but for its 'torture and horror'. 'We cannot in good conscience', he wrote, 'praise these tastes.'<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Melina Esse, 'Rossini's Noisy Bodies', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21 (2009), 27–64. See also Benjamin Walton, *Rossini in Restoration Paris: The Sounds of Modern Life* (Cambridge, 2007); and Emily I. Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (Cambridge, 2013), 233–57.

<sup>29</sup> Carlotta Sorba, 'Ernani Hats: Italian Opera as Repertoire of Symbols During the Risorgimento', in *Oxford Handbook of the New Cultural History of Music*, ed. Jane F. Fulcher (New York, 2011), 428–51. Count Joseph Alexander Hübner also obsesses with Italian lungs as quoted in Mary Ann Smart, *Waiting for Verdi: Opera and Political Opinion in Nineteenth-Century Italy, 1815–1848* (Oakland, CA, 2018), 152–3.

<sup>30</sup> Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, trans. Richard N. Coe (London, 2008), 441–2. On his relationship with Pierre Daru see n. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Abramo Basevi wrote about the subject matter: 'if we consider the present depravity of taste – when audiences seek recreation in the stimulus of the revolting, just as paralyzed limbs quiver at strong electric shocks – our wonderment is easily quelled'. *The Operas of Giuseppe Verdi*, trans. Edward Schneider and Stefano Castelvechi (Chicago, 2013), 162–3.

<sup>32</sup> *Gazzetta ufficiale di Venezia* (12 March 1851). Budden gives Locatelli too little credit, I think, when he reads this review as noting only the 'bewildering novelty' of the piece, maybe in part because he does not quote any of Locatelli's subsequent reviews. Mary Phillips-Matz is kinder, saying that such reviews 'reflect confusion about the score and the moral issues it raised'. She, too, does not

*footnote continued on next page*

Locatelli was in part positioning himself against the historic expectations for Venetian – and Italian – audiences and so it could be easy to dismiss him as having internalised negative stereotypes. But I want to approach his criticism instead as a set of instructions on how to listen like a Venetian, and therefore also on how to listen *to* Venice. Given the intense interest in Verdi's new work, editors all over Europe were waiting for the judgement of the local critic. In the rush to print first impressions, newspapers such as the *Wiener Zeitung* extracted Locatelli's lavish praise of the orchestral writing, while the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* simply reprinted the entire review. Since Verdi's publisher owned the *Gazzetta musicale* it is perhaps no surprise that that paper printed numerous other reviews and bits of news about *Rigoletto*. Locatelli's subsequent reviews were clear deviations from his paper's norm, a sign of both newsworthiness and popularity; and perhaps even of an 'official' Habsburg seal of approval, since the paper was the administration's mouthpiece.

From the very first reviews critics focused on Verdi's instrumentation, positioning the military band as a symbol of sonic excess, as Fétis had done only a few months earlier. The critic for *L'Italia musicale* – by no means a pro-Verdi paper – observed that while Verdi still 'sacrificed' singing voices to the volume of the instruments, as he had done in earlier works, his orchestration was now less overbearing: the voices were no longer subjected to brutal domination by the 'bass drum, the trombones, and that ridiculous exaggeration of *tintè*'. 'The reign of the bass drum ... is as good as done', the critic proclaimed with satisfaction. A judgement like this can become a bid to associate Italian sound with the temperance of northern Europe, if read from the perspective of a critic such as Fétis.

But Locatelli took a different tack, comparing *Rigoletto* with Rossini's *Semiramide* (which had premiered in Venice in 1823) and explaining that Verdi, like Rossini nearly thirty years earlier, had 'moderated the intemperance of the instruments' in response to critiques from 'the public voice'. In this formulation Venice is positioned as a historic site of a more rational critique, resisting or correcting voices from the outside rather than responding to them. There was no possibility to argue that the Venetians were seeking out excessive stimulation since *Rigoletto*'s successes proved they were in fact moderating any overindulgence. In other words, Venetian judgements were sound.

In order to follow Locatelli's local listening, however, there is reason to look outside the opera house. It is difficult to conclude that there were many Venetians attending La Fenice after 1849 or that the behaviour of those who might have been in the audiences should be taken at face value, in part due to what many understood as an intentional boycott of opera houses throughout Italy as a result of Habsburg rule.<sup>33</sup> The Habsburg administration honed in on well-attended theatrical

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look at any of his later reviews. See Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, I: 483, and Phillips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography*, 284.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Stamatov, 'Interpretive Activism and the Political Uses of Verdi's Operas in the 1840s', *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002), 345–66. For a more critical view on the opera house as a (straightforward) site of subversive politics, see Susan Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women* (Cambridge, 2013), 27–33.

performances as a symptom of stability, and opera houses were ideal sites for gathering the local population and promoting the values of the governing regime. In response – and in parallel to the silences that greeted the triumphant celebrations of the state – the theatre became a site of discourse in which many Italians across the region refused to participate. In Mantua in January 1849, for example, a particularly comical Austrian order alluded to shadowy figures intimidating people away from the theatre, and threatened arrest and punishment to those who disturbed performances by instilling fear and unrest in ‘good citizens’.<sup>34</sup> The order specifically tied regular theatre attendance to peace, order and acceptance of the ‘legitimate’ (meaning Habsburg) government; which meant that *not* attending the opera was implicitly defined as criminal behaviour. Thus campaigns to discourage patronage of the theatres became a republican cause, one that continued after the restoration of 1849.<sup>35</sup>

Nearly two years after this revolutionary moment, the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* claimed that *Rigoletto* had managed to repopulate not only the Teatro La Fenice, but also the city itself, drawing in spectators from adjoining cities and towns. Given the rumours of continued boycotts and of a wholesale withdrawal of Venetian aristocrats to the countryside to avoid conflict with the republicans, such a declaration reads as ‘proof’ that *Rigoletto's* excellence as an aesthetic object transcended political concerns. This theory is belied somewhat by the daily numbers of those entering and leaving the city by railroad as published in the *Gazzetta ufficiale*, since the numbers from the days of performances are almost indistinguishable from those on which the theatre was ‘dark’.<sup>36</sup> Opera and politics became especially tangled when, with great pomp and circumstance, a visiting Franz Joseph attended the final three performances, joined on 27 March by Radetzky and Archduke Maximilian.<sup>37</sup> The opportunity to see the young emperor was as

<sup>34</sup> *L'indipendente* (12 January 1849).

<sup>35</sup> In a letter to her mother, John Ruskin's wife, Effie Gray, lamented that much of Italian society refused to return ‘not on account of the Austrians at all, but are kept in a sort of fear by what the Republican party would say in Venice and it is a want of moral courage on their part’. See Mary Lutyens, ed., *Effie in Venice: Unpublished Letters of Mrs John Ruskin written from Venice between 1849–1852* (London, 1965), 91.

<sup>36</sup> The *Gazzetta musicale* published this claim on 23 March 1851. Performances of *Rigoletto* took place on 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 29 and 30 March. The train numbers from the *Gazzetta ufficiale di Venezia* are as follows: 10 March: 567 in, 647 out; 11 March: 610 in, 528 out; 12 March: 485 in, 487 out; 13 March: 477 in, 435 out; 14 March: 406 in, 517 out; 15 March: 773 in, 506 out; 16 March: 697 in, 525 out; 17 March: 540 in, 672 out; 18 March: 649 in, 546 out; 19 March: 728 in, 554 out; 20 March: 678 in, 580 out; 21 March: 582 in, 568 out; 22 March: 615 in, 472 out; 23 March: 590 in, 501 out; 24 March: 578 in, 501 out; 25 March: 698 in, 592 out; 26 March: 649 in, 626 out; 27 March: 670 in, 394 out; 28 March: 569 in, 622 out; 29 March: 766 in, 481 out; 30 March: 939 in, 593 out; 31 March: 733 in, 888 out. Obviously these numbers alone would offer little information about the various inclinations – political, musical, or otherwise – of *Rigoletto's* first listeners.

<sup>37</sup> In addition to the posters from La Fenice that announce his presence on 27, 29 and 30 March, the *Gazzetta ufficiale di Venezia* published reports about his attendance at on 27, 28 and 31 March 1851. On 31 March the evening edition of the *Wiener Zeitung* translated and republished the Venetian report from 28 March. For more on the financial aspect, see Marcello Conati, *Rigoletto: un'analisi drammatico-musicale* (Venice, 1992), 68, n. 210.

much of a draw as the novelty of a Verdi opera and, according to news reports, he and Radetzky were warmly received. On those nights blocks of seats were reserved for members of the military, which meant that *Rigoletto's* first run ended not accompanied – as we might have once assumed – by the heated applause of Italian patriots, but rather with cries for the Habsburg emperor.

These theatrical politics complicate the concept of the Venetian ear in two provocative ways. First, *Rigoletto's* success may have been significantly more inflected by Austrian values than usually thought, since stereotyped notions of Italians as noisy and impulsive may have promoted the idea of *Rigoletto* as more moderate in sound and because those loyal to the emperor ensured its financial (if not also its cultural) success. But at the same time, the interior of La Fenice during the performances of *Rigoletto* can be seen as another kind of visual spectacle, where the presence, enthusiasm or detachment of Venetians was carefully noted. The Venetian ear, I argue, also needed to be seen. In order to listen as Locatelli listened, or to divine what he heard, we should know more about the street and indeed the canals. Since Venice's aquatic landscape forced people into a few confined spaces, the Piazza San Marco acts a microcosm of Venice itself. At least there we know we can find Venetians – listening, watching, refusing to listen, being watched.

### 'Stiletto every soldier'

The piazza sits between the Procuratie Nuove and the Procuratie Vecchie, two edifices built centuries ago to house the city's Procurators, with the so-called Piazzetta buffering the square from the Basilica (see Fig. 1). Walking towards the sea on the Piazzetta – with the Basilica and Ducal Palace on the left and the campanile on the right – leads one to the Molo, the quay where Radetzky disembarked after his triumphal procession but which otherwise served as a spot to sit and socialise. Mary Shelley recounted standing there while watching two gondoliers take turns reciting stanzas of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* in the Venetian dialect until they remembered no more, singing in their monotonous way.<sup>38</sup> Shelley's encounter was fortuitous but not unheard of since tourists and Venetians alike flocked to the cafes lining the perimeter of the piazza, where in the 1850s any paying customer could sit outside to drink a coffee, eat an ice or smoke (reportedly awful) Austrian cigars.

Everything – and everyone – in the square was visible both day and night. Contemporary observers understood that each cafe boasted a distinct clientele, marked off by class and politics. Caffè Florian, located in the Procuratie Nuove, played cosmopolitan neutral, its collection of foreign newspapers such as *Galignani's Messenger* attracting the tourists that presumably helped ease tensions between Venetians and Austrians, who drew further boundaries within the cafe itself and took over different rooms in the back. Austrians and members of the military occupied Caffè Quadri across the way, where they were allowed to smoke their

<sup>38</sup> Shelley, *Rambles*, II: 125–6.

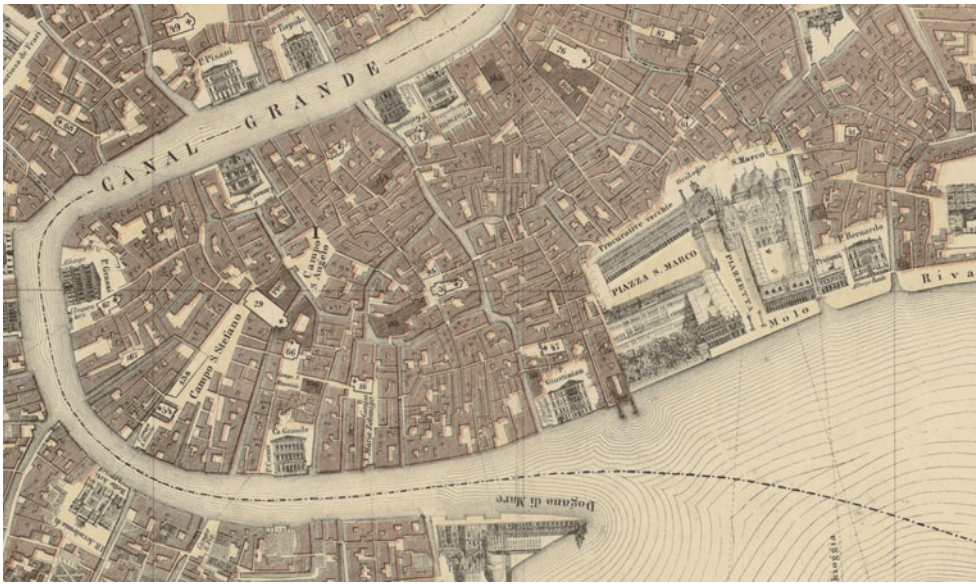


Fig. 1: Piazza San Marco and surrounding area, 1850, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE C-1768.

cigarettes.<sup>39</sup> Upper-crust Venetians, whose politics as a rule could most generously be considered reactionary, whiled away their hours in Caffè Sutil; and younger Italians gathered at Caffè Specchi looking for a more affordable cup of coffee. Those with empty pockets could stroll under the arcades, which remained lit by gas throughout the evening, or gather on any free steps.

The Habsburg administration approved the installation and development of gas-light infrastructure in the city in 1839; and while the comparative ubiquity of gas anonymised the experience of lighting, its centralisation represented the reach of the government, quite literally via the pipes that carried gas from the gasholders in far-off Piazza San Francesco.<sup>40</sup> The support for such technological advancements, however, is difficult to untangle from the Habsburg desire to oversee Italians. As we saw in connection with the theatre boycotts, the administration remained paranoid about anything that took place behind closed doors or in shadows, a vulnerability that Italians throughout the peninsula took care to exploit: in numerous Italian cities silence and darkness went hand in hand as modes of resistance.<sup>41</sup> For a nineteenth-

<sup>39</sup> William Dean Howells, *Venetian Life* (Cambridge, MA, 1907), 49; *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy*, 4th edn (London, 1852), 299.

<sup>40</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA, 1998), 29.

<sup>41</sup> On accounts published in Venetian papers, see *Il mondo nuovo* (14 June 1849) and *L'indipendente* (12 January 1849). For more information on the installation of gaslight in Venice see *Bollettino di notizie italiane e straniere e delle più importanti invenzioni e scoperte, o Progresso dell'industria e delle utili cognizioni* (Milan, 1842), 57–60; and Gianjacopo Fontana, *Manuale ad uso del forestiere in Venezia* (Venice, 1847), 155.

century administrator well versed in the shadowy threat of secret political societies such as the *carbonari*, any rebellious – although not necessarily illegal – behaviours could indicate hidden plots meant to destabilise the government.<sup>42</sup> In September 1849, for instance, Governor General Karl Gorzkowski decried the fact ‘that some have attempted, by means of inscriptions or figures or similar things on walls, and with the diffusion of fake news [*false notizie*], to provoke aversion or contempt with the present order of things’.<sup>43</sup> Such suspicion seemed validated when, in late 1852, the Habsburg administration condemned and later executed the first group of ‘Belfiore martyrs’, five men accused of running ‘revolutionary committees’ in the Veneto region, including within Venice.<sup>44</sup>

Habsburg paranoia, then, found a worthy target in Venice, where everything did happen in shadows – or where the murky atmospheres of travel narratives, novels, dramas and histories made them think so.<sup>45</sup> As we have seen, the most informative accounts of Italian-Habsburg confrontations come from foreign observers, who were less constrained by Austrian censorship, if still compromised by conflicting relationships to imperialist power structures. Since Venice was a site of international tourism, news of widely seen Venetian protests could travel farther. If the expectations were that Italians would be noisy and ungovernable, then reports that reaffirmed these tendencies would hardly be newsworthy, much less compelling accounts of an oppressed people. For protests to catch the eye of the foreigner, they had to be performative and obvious.

Foreigner, Venetian and Austrian came together in the Piazza San Marco, and at approximately six each evening eyes and ears would turn to the centre of the piazza, where military band members would bring their music stands and candles and position themselves to play in full view of those patronising the cafes. Although the bands would play Italian operatic melodies in an attempt to reflect local taste, it is likely that these concerts were the local iteration of what Claudio Vellutini has identified as an elaborate cultural programme, one designed to promote the image of a ‘supranational’ Empire.<sup>46</sup> In 1844 one French observer mentioned hearing excerpts by Donizetti and Saverio Mercadante, and noted that the bands were likely to play

<sup>42</sup> On the policing of the *carbonari* in Venice, see Laven, ‘Law and Order’, 392–6.

<sup>43</sup> David Barnes lists other examples of graffiti in ‘Historicizing the Stones’, 249, and notes one specific case in which graffiti was inscribed on the walls of the church of the Santi Apostoli. John Ruskin described – in more polite language – graffiti on a sign prohibiting the use of columns at the Ducal Palace as urinals under penalty of a fine. See John Lewis Bradley, ed., *Ruskin’s Letters from Venice, 1851–1852* (New Haven, 1955), 31–2.

<sup>44</sup> On the sentencing of these men and dozens more, see Luigi Zini, *Storia d’Italia dal 1850 al 1866 continuata da quella di Giuseppe La Farina*, 2 vols. (Milan, 1866), II.1, 354–72. As recently as 2009, a group of local intellectuals in Mantua questioned the decision to perform the ‘Radetzky March’ as part of a New Year’s concert given Radetzky’s treatment of local citizens. See the *Gazzetta di Mantova* (2 January 2009).

<sup>45</sup> On the similar paranoia of American plantation owners and its exploitation by African slaves, see Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001).

<sup>46</sup> Claudio Vellutini, ‘Cultural Engineering: Italian Opera in Vienna, 1816–1848’ (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2015).

whatever was currently popular at La Fenice.<sup>47</sup> These concerts were already a staple of the piazza's soundscape well before 1848; but sometime after Radetzky's reconquest in 1849 the nature of these events transformed.

In 1851 Ruskin reported that, far from expressing appreciation at hearing native melodies, Venetian listeners glowered at the band, as if they wished to 'stiletto every soldier' that played.<sup>48</sup> Ruskin's intuition was sound: the tensions that boiled over from the lack of work did end with soldiers being murdered on the streets.<sup>49</sup> At the end of the decade, Wagner likened Austrian officers and Venetians to oil and water, noting that although Venetians listening to the performances numbered in the thousands, they would never applaud for fear of committing cultural treason.<sup>50</sup> Two American eyewitnesses – the consul William Dean Howells and Charles Henry Jones – contradicted Wagner's account, both claiming instead that the piazza was 'void' or empty during these performances. According to these men, Venetians would conspicuously not set foot onto the piazza while the band played, a tradition that Howells traced back to 1849.<sup>51</sup>

As Americans, Howells and Jones might be expected to express sympathy with the Venetians, but as a German political exile Wagner was in Venice by the grace of Archduke Maximilian, and grateful enough to the Habsburg administration that (as he tells it) he happily doffed his hat to his protector while the Venetians attempted to slip away.<sup>52</sup> The English Ruskin was just as likely to skewer Italians as Austrians, although he often went out of his way to see Radetzky or Franz Joseph in person – even if he famously described the two as 'a great white baboon and a small brown monkey'.<sup>53</sup> If we focus on Ruskin's interpretation in particular, what is most striking is the intensity and drama with which he imbues the unruly, defiant stance of Venetians listening to these performances. Although Ruskin paints his Venetians with perhaps too broad a brush, he assigns them an interiority absent from the other descriptions of Venetian sound. Watching someone listen invites absorption in their world, and the cafes lining the piazza afforded the perfect vantage points from which to contemplate – and keep an eye on – the Venetians. The theatricality of the situation – the spectator, the representation of listening, the dramatic unawareness of one of the parties – was also reproducible, encouraging daily contact with Venetian interiority.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Jules-François Lecomte, *Venise ou Coup-d'œil littéraire artistique, historique, poétique et pittoresque, sur les monuments et les curiosités de cette cité* (Paris, 1844), 40.

<sup>48</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, II: 67.

<sup>49</sup> Effie Gray recounted to her mother in a letter written on 15 December 1849 a story about an unemployed Venetian who killed the 'Commandant' at the Arsenal and wounded another. The account published in the *Gazzetta di Venezia* on 16 December names the man as Giuseppe Comastri, aged somewhere in his sixties and, according to the Austrians, a drunk. That supposed fact – Gray's version spoke instead of his and his family's desperate hunger – kept it from being considered a conspiracy. Lutyens, *Effie in Venice*, 79.

<sup>50</sup> Wagner, *My Life*, II: 696.

<sup>51</sup> Howells, *Venetian Life*, 15. Charles Henry Jones, *Recollections of Venice* (Reading, PA, 1862), 22–3.

<sup>52</sup> Wagner, *My Life*, II: 702–3.

<sup>53</sup> Bradley, *Ruskin's Letters from Venice*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago, 1988).



Yet it would be a disservice to all involved to see these historical interactions only as tableaux, in part because they did involve sound: a sound that, as we recall, was wielded as a metaphor for Italian excess. Most importantly for our purposes, the polarities played out in the piazza suggest a different interpretation of the terms that governed the early reception of *Rigoletto*, with Italians now the voices of moderation and the tuba-playing, bass-thumping Austrians suddenly the noisy and warlike group imposing on a dignified Venetian serenity. In positioning Venice as a site of sonic restraint, then, the opera critic Locatelli was perhaps not attempting to equalise the volume of Italian music to meet European ideals, but rather drawing attention to the clamour of the Austrians.

I want to take this argument one step further, to suggest that it is in such points of contact between urban soundscapes and operatic soundworlds that we can listen in on a process through which opera came to sound *like* the city – or could be listened to like the city. With all attention focused on the Venetians for the premiere of *Rigoletto*, I want to look closely at a few scenes in which listening – if successfully undertaken – grants access to new information or changes the listener's understanding of circumstances. Earlier in the nineteenth century, characters in such scenes could trust their ears, since examples of onstage listening were most often a reaction to diegetic sound effects: offstage trumpet or drums calls announcing the arrival of royalty or the outcome of a trial, mandolins or harps marking diegetic songs, offstage party music to stage a banquet scene, and so on. In Act I of Vincenzo Bellini's *La straniera* (1829), for instance, the eponymous foreign woman (Alaide) is introduced through her offstage lament while – unbeknownst to her – the smitten Arturo listens from within her hut. Through Arturo as eavesdropper, the spectator learns about Alaide's sad (if still vague) past. When she enters her hut, Alaide immediately discovers Arturo and the two interact.

In *Rigoletto*, however, such acts of eavesdropping are often frustrated and confused, where the characters in Arturo's position are not necessarily caught and those introduced through diegetic song such as Alaide are not signalling their 'true' character. In other words, in *Rigoletto* sound can be mendacious, and listening suspect. Part of the temporal specificity of *Rigoletto*, I argue, is that listening becomes part of the dramatic spectacle, where sound's possible deceit prompts an interior processing that can be seen. Of course I am not suggesting that either Verdi or Piave wrote *Rigoletto* as an act of protest, but that among the opera's famed 'fusion' of multiple styles or registers is one that mirrors or comments on the contested scenes of listening and not-listening that played out on a daily basis in the city's piazzas.<sup>55</sup> To put this another way, I want to explore the possibility that historical listeners interpreted the scenes based on their experiences listening outside the opera house.

*Rigoletto* opens with military-band excess, which is quickly associated with the tyrannical Duke of Mantua. In this elaborate variation on the conventional operatic

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<sup>55</sup> Piero Weiss, 'Verdi and the Fusion of Genres', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 35 (1982): 138–56.

scene of festivity, three ensembles play cheerful music that is meant to be heard as emanating from the party on stage and heard by the characters.<sup>56</sup> We are first introduced to the Duke as a band plays party music offstage. His first aria, itself a pure party piece ('Questo o quella'), is accompanied by the orchestra in the pit, its sonorities less marked as realistic, less insistently audible. Finally, as he turns to his attempted seduction of the Countess Ceprano, he adopts a new poetic and musical register and yet a third ensemble joins him, this time a string quartet that plays a minuet and perigordino (a stylised local dance), giving the Duke's lubricity a veneer of courtly elegance. This scene exploits the conventional associations of stage (or *banda*) music with celebration and superficial, even callous sociability; but it also recalls the description of Radetzky's parade with which I began, where the appearance of festivity does not necessarily translate into gaiety for all. The most important effect of this careful sequencing of *banda* music is to mimic the Duke's manipulation of those around him. In other words, the knitting together of the three ensembles – offstage, pit orchestra and onstage – does not merely invoke the easy flow of band music between the opera house and the street; it also juxtaposes the different moods and identities of the Duke, underlining for the listener in both musical and spatial terms his ability to overpower the scene by imposing his own desires.<sup>57</sup>

The tyrannical Duke, in other words, can be listened to as Venetians supposedly listened to the Austrian military bands – with disdain for his political and personal excesses, signified by excessive sound. His status as a villain is seemingly solidified with his continual shift of registers, a fluidity that – like his libertine predecessor, Don Giovanni – underlines his ability to lie. Indeed his exploits become more and more exaggerated as the opera unfolds, starting when the audience learns that he has been seducing Rigoletto's daughter, Gilda, under a false identity. He sneaks into her house and, overhearing her innocent declaration of love, interrupts the unknowing Gilda and makes an impossible declaration of his own.

Rigoletto's later insistence that Gilda *see* the Duke for who he really is – a fraud – seems to stem from the last scene of Act I, when the Duke's courtiers abduct Gilda, thinking she is Rigoletto's lover rather than his daughter. The scene is total sensorial confusion: it takes place in a dark street with no outlet (*via cieca*, literally a 'blind' street) and the courtiers have blindfolded Rigoletto. The courtiers' joke that in his blind state Rigoletto does not know what is happening as he helps to kidnap his own daughter and laughs as she cries. Rigoletto's acousmatic anxiety – in which he is unable correctly to assign a source to the sound – makes him distrust that which he cannot also see. When the Duke rapes Gilda offstage in Act II,

<sup>56</sup> Based on the presence of three ensembles Pierluigi Petrobelli suggests an affinity between this scene and the final scene of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Petrobelli, 'Verdi and *Don Giovanni*. On the Opening Scene of *Rigoletto*', in *Music in the Theatre: Essays on Verdi and Other Composers*, trans. Roger Parker (Princeton, 1994), 34–47.

<sup>57</sup> Luca Zoppelli, '“Stage Music” in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2 (1990), 29–39.

Rigoletto tries to cover his search for his daughter with seemingly unaffected ‘tra la’s as he surveils the Duke’s courtiers.<sup>58</sup>

These issues come together in the famous Act III quartet, in which the Duke’s musical and political ‘deafness’ is so evident that we can see how Venetians might have construed his music as out of time as well as out of place.<sup>59</sup> At the beginning of the third act, the Duke sings about capricious women in an inn – his famous aria ‘La donna è mobile’ – as he is watched from the shadows by Rigoletto and Gilda, who by this point in the plot is also the Duke’s lover. Rigoletto has engineered this moment of unveiling in order to convince Gilda that he is right to order the assassination of the amoral Duke. The ensuing quartet was celebrated from these first performances for delineating and connecting four simultaneous affects by focusing on the emotions of characters – Gilda’s gasping ‘sighs and tears’ are matched by Maddalena’s knowing laughter, while the Duke’s carefree lovemaking contrasts with Rigoletto’s attempts to soothe Gilda. The confusion of the scene should collapse into chaos; but the division of the characters into distinct pairs, separated both spatially and affectively, creates space for more complexity.

The scene is the seeming inversion of Gilda’s abduction and Rigoletto’s humiliation at the end of Act I, so the questions of who is overhearing and who is watching are of the utmost importance (see Fig. 2). Rigoletto and Gilda are now the most aware, watching and listening from outside, but therefore also the least visible to those within the scene. The unknowing Duke turns his attention to the sceptical Maddalena, who listens to him with the knowledge that her brother will soon kill the appealing young man, and seduces her with the scene’s most melodic material, ‘Bella figlia dell’amore’. The moment draws all eyes and ears to the Duke: he is the only member of the quartet whose words are heard in full without the interruption of the other voices. When the other voices enter again, his classically Italianate line moves forward mechanically, unaffected by the increasingly dense and troubled reactions from the other characters and oblivious to the presence of the eavesdropping Gilda and Rigoletto or Maddalena’s involvement in the plot to murder him.

By eschewing melody after the Duke’s initial iteration, Verdi gave more room to the thickly woven vocal textures and harmonies: exactly the sort of instrumental improvement that the critic from *L’Italia musicale* would attribute to the cosmopolitan influence of Beethoven and Meyerbeer. The celebration of the quartet’s cosmopolitan textures rather than the Duke’s Italianate melody indicated a clear path forward – a path for Italian cultural development that adhered to the foreign expectations

<sup>58</sup> On the historical and political context of Gilda’s rape, see Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, 121–9. Elizabeth Hudson argues for Gilda’s sexual agency in ‘Gilda Seduced: A Tale Untold’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4 (1992), 229–51.

<sup>59</sup> I take this term from Carolyn Abbate, who wields it to describe how, through such self-referential moments of listening and composing, opera ‘flaunts itself, representing within itself those who watch and hear it’ (119). The focused attention on the Duke’s inability to see or hear much of the scene, in other words, works to temporarily exaggerate his ‘Otherness’ for the opera audience, who listen and see as Gilda and Rigoletto do and therefore identify with the father–daughter duo. See Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991), 119–55.



Fig. 2: Frontispiece for 1852 Ricordi vocal score of *Rigoletto*. © British Library Board, Music Collections DRT Digital Store E.190.aa.

articulated by critics such as Fétis. As with the varying stances of performative listening on the piazza or in Teatro La Fenice, however, the quartet's interplay between simplicity and complexity moves each of the other characters to unique and conflicting actions. While the Duke learns nothing from the experience and goes to sleep, Rigoletto believes Gilda has granted him sincere permission to carry on with his murderous plan and hurries away, while Maddalena – who does not have the benefit of knowing the Duke in other contexts and is therefore charmed – will soon convince her brother that the Duke is too charming to kill off. In the end, it seems as if no one was listening.

### 'Hidden in silence and darkness'

After overhearing Maddalena convince Sparafucile to kill the next person that knocked on their door rather than the Duke, an agonised Gilda makes her decision and knocks. Only with this sound, of course, do Maddalena and Sparafucile become aware that someone else is there, confirmed once they open the door for a young

boy – Gilda dressed in men’s clothing – his silhouette lit by a flash of lightning. Maddalena closes the door behind her and the rest of the scene is ‘hidden in silence and darkness’. This is a strange direction given that in this moment there is neither silence nor darkness, but rather the *fortissimo* crashes of a violent storm accompanied by sharp flashes of lightning. A more convincing reading, perhaps, is that it signals Rigoletto’s great fear of that which he cannot see or that which he cannot make seen.

This fear is realised when Rigoletto hears a voice – the Duke’s offstage voice – singing a line from ‘La donna è mobile’ in the distance. Unsure of the sound’s origin, as when he was blindfolded in Act I, he opens Sparafucile’s sack to find his daughter dying instead.<sup>60</sup> I argue that the Duke’s fateful interruption is, in fact, the moment that ties operatic interpretation to material Venetian realities. This dramatic moment sets the song as a horrible parody of a barcarolle, which in turn helps to ‘place’ the opera in Venice (despite its nominal setting in Mantua). In Italian opera the dramatic function of the gondolier’s song mutated from melancholy local colour to a tuneful obliviousness that heightened the sombre drama of a scene. In Rossini’s *Otello* (1816), the gondolier is an offstage voice intoning lines from Dante, both signalling the opera’s Venetian locale and commenting on the dramatic moment. In two later Venetian-set operas, Donizetti’s *Marino Faliero* (1835) and Verdi’s *I due Foscari* (1844), offstage gondoliers joyfully sing of calm waters while the drama indicates anything but – a juxtaposition that highlighted interior drama. As with the mistranslating foreign tourists, in these later depictions we hear the gondolier as without agency or awareness, where the listener reinterprets and gives meaning to his words. By mid-century, then, the operatic gondolier helped project a certain ideal of Italian song, but his picturesque meandering at the same time reinforced foreign stereotypes of Italian indolence and of Venice as a city without industry.

When published abroad ‘La donna è mobile’ was in fact inappropriately labelled as a barcarolle, as when the number was published as part of a ‘Musical Bouquet’ of operatic hits in London in 1854 (see Fig. 3). The aria does not bear the strict generic markers of a barcarolle – it is in 3/8, to begin with – but I believe the labelling of this English arrangement is more than a bid for commercial success. When the aria is heard the second time in the opera, its placement and function correspond to what we would expect of an operatic barcarolle. Erasing the piece’s original dramatic function – unveiling the Duke’s betrayal of his innocent lover – the arrangement takes advantage of the creative licence afforded to the foreign tourist to put the singer in the role of pleasure-seeker and to position the listener as wooed woman. The text of this English translation explicitly describes a romantic moonlit boat ride, even going so far as to give directions to the anonymous ‘boatman’ depicted in the illustration. Here we end up with a soundscape problem, then, where meaning is stripped from Italian sound in favour of protecting a privileged listener’s picturesque experience.

<sup>60</sup> Rather than focus on her silencing, Roger Parker argues that Gilda’s moment of ‘melodic generation’ after the discovery of her body in the sack is a celebration of the character rather than a concession to the limits of the plot. Roger Parker, ‘Lina Kneels; Gilda Sings’, in *Leonora’s Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton, 1997), 149–67.



Fig. 3: Frontispiece for 'La donna è mobile', *Musical Bouquet* (London, 1854). © British Library Board, Music Collections H.2345./553.

The Italians are in all ways, then, pushed to the background – quite literally in the accompanying image, which features a darkened gondolier ferrying a young couple across the lagoon, complete with an inaccurate but still recognisably Venetian landscape. Venice and its people are reduced to a picturesque background against which more personal dramas can play out.

That conclusion, of course, does not necessarily help us solve the problem of what Venetians were doing during the military band concerts each night – or, indeed, whether they were silent during Radetzky's entrance. As Dawkins first demonstrated, however, to take the question so literally would be to miss the point on our end, in part because we cannot rely on any of our sources to be literal. Sound as much as opera directs us to the production of mythologies; sound points to how these mythologies were experienced in the material world, beyond the hermetic space of the opera house. Yet this mishearing of 'La donna è mobile' explicitly ties operatic soundworld to city soundscape, suggesting that operatic listenings too were in a sense material, experienced in the 'real' world. However it may obscure – or even silence – the Venetians, it responds to the new international attention paid to the ways that Venetians listened, which seemingly developed both in concert with and in response to Habsburg expectations.

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