



Massimo Zicari

## Verdi in Victorian London

Open Book Publishers

---

### 3. Nabucco and I Lombardi (1846)

---

Publisher: Open Book Publishers

Place of publication: Open Book Publishers

Year of publication: 2016

Published on OpenEdition Books: 1 June 2017

Serie: OBP collection

Electronic ISBN: 9782821881648



<http://books.openedition.org>

#### Electronic reference

ZICARI, Massimo. 3. *Nabucco and I Lombardi (1846)* In: *Verdi in Victorian London* [online]. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016 (generated 08 mai 2019). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/obp/3115>>. ISBN: 9782821881648.

---

### 3. *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi* (1846)

---

Benjamin Lumley opened the opera season at Her Majesty's Theatre on 3 March 1846 with *Nabucco*; *I Lombardi* followed a couple of months later and was performed on 12 May. As Frederick Crowest put it, "the object in presenting this *Nabucco* by Verdi was to afford the English public an opportunity of a further judgment upon the ear-arresting composer of *Ernani*."<sup>1</sup>

In London, *Nabucco* had to be renamed *Nino, Re d'Assyria*, in compliance with a norm that precluded even the slightest hint of a biblical subject in connection to the stage. The change in the title and the plot conformed to this norm, although it was applied with a certain degree of flexibility; in fact "it was possible for religious plays to be granted the Lord Chamberlain's license as long as the directness of the scriptural parallels was obscured sufficiently to satisfy the letter rather than the spirit of the prohibition on scriptural drama."<sup>2</sup> The ban was generally mitigated in so far as an operatic performance in Italian was involved. Since the vast majority of the public did not really understand the lyrics, which were, to some extent, considered complementary to the music, a few changes in the plot and its transposition to a safer historical setting would suffice. The same religious subject which would be banned as a drama was free to be presented in its "musical disguise."

On the occasion of *Nino's* premiere, both the general public and the critics seemed to divide into two opposing camps: while the first was always keen on novelty, the second tended to reject it entirely in the

---

1 Crowest, *Verdi*, pp. 39–40.

2 John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824–1901* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 101–05.

name of so-called classicism. In a popular sense the opera, conducted by Michael Balfe and interpreted by Luciano Fornasari as Nino, Giulia Sanchioli as Abigail and Amalia Corbari as Fenena, was a success. On the other hand, not all the critics had a high opinion of the artistic value of Verdi's new operas; while Chorley from *The Athenaeum* and Davison from *The Musical World* wrote of Verdi's works in hostile terms, *The Times* and *The Illustrated London News* showed signs of sincere appreciation.

Chorley, whose opinion on Verdi had not improved at all, was among his strongest opponents: "But with every sympathy in favour of a new style, and a new master, our first hearing of the *Nino* has done nothing to change our first judgment of the limited nature of Signor Verdi's resources."<sup>3</sup> Chorley's antagonistic position was founded on two criticisms: lack of melody, to which declamation was preferred, and abundance of noisy effects.

Signor Verdi's *forte* is declamatory music of the highest passion. In this, never hesitating to force the effect, or to drive the singers to the "most hazardous passes"—he is justified for some extravagance, by an occasional burst of brilliancy, surpassing that of most modern composers [...] But Signor Verdi "is nothing if not noisy;" and, by perpetually putting forth his energies in one and the same direction, tempts us, out of contradiction, to long for the sweetest piece of sickliness which Paisiello put forth long ere the notion of an orchestra had reached Italy, or the singer's art was thought to mean a superhuman force of lungs.<sup>4</sup>

Against these shortcomings lay the figure of Paisiello, whose grace and delicacy were now understood as the vestige of a remote epoch that had gone for ever. In this respect Chorley showed himself to be consistent over time. In fact, quite similar a judgment is to be found in *The Athenaeum* of 16 March, when he reviewed the first performance of *I Lombardi* at Her Majesty's Theatre, featuring Giulia Grisi as Giselda, Mario as Oronte, Luciano Fornasari as Pagano and Leone Corelli as Arvino.

From the first moment when we examined a portfolio of Sig. Verdi's music [*Ath.* No. 879], we have never seen cause to change the judgment of his claims as a composer then expressed. Nor has the rage for his compositions, since excited in Italy, shaken us. Even the enthusiasts confess them to be meagre in melody—to contain no solitary indication

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Athenaeum*, March 7, 1846, p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

of a new form or manner of *air*, such as gives an individuality to Bellini and Donizetti,—while, to praise their science on the glaring orchestral touches, is to insult the capacities of those who know the meaning of language. There is more science in one of Haydn’s minuets to his early quartets, than in all Sig. Verdi’s noisy mixtures of ophicleides, *piccoli*, harps, etc. etc.—nay there is a flagrant disregard of science in his music. The vocal composer who writes noisy orchestral parts in *unison* with his singers—who utterly disdain the keeping which allots one order of support and decoration to a *solo*, and another to an assemblage of voices, is bound to show good cause for the reversal of every known principle of common sense, and the sacrifice of every effect. Sig. Verdi is *bizarre* with a vengeance: under the idea of contrast or climax, of dramatic force and passion;—but his science is “to seek”—with his melody;—and unless he take the field under some new form, we cannot believe that his popularity will long survive the discovery of the recipe by which his dash is concocted.<sup>5</sup>

After a detailed analysis of the interpreters’ achievements, and despite all his negative remarks, Chorley could not deny that, on the whole, *I Lombardi* was a popular success. However, it was not so popular as to put the beloved classics at risk: “Every one will like to hear it once—but *Il barbiere* and *Otello* will hardly be driven from our stage by the *furore* that it excites.”<sup>6</sup>

Of a similar opinion was Davison who, in reviewing *Nabucco* in *The Musical World*, attacked the emerging Italian composer in vehement, nasty terms.

*Ernani* led us to suspect, and *Nabucco* has certified our suspicion, that of all the modern Italian composers Verdi is the most thoroughly insignificant. We listen, vainly, as the work proceeds, for the semblance of a melody. There is positively nothing, not even a feeling of rhythm—but rather indeed, a very unpleasant disregard for that important element of musical art. The choruses are nothing but the commonest tunes, arranged almost invariably in unison—perhaps because the composer knows not how to write in parts. The concerted music is patchy, rambling and unconnected. The cantabiles are always unrhythmical—and the absence of design is everywhere observable. The harmonies are either the tritest common-places, or something peculiarly odd and unpleasant. Nothing can possibly be more feeble than the orchestration. The employment of

---

5 *The Athenaeum*, May 16, 1846, p. 506.

6 *Ibid.*

the wind instruments is remarkably infelicitous, and all the experiments are failures. The overture is the poorest stuff imaginable, and yet the only glimpses of tune in the opera are comprised within its limits—and these are subsequently employed throughout the work *ad nauseam*. Serious criticism would be thrown away upon such a work. Either “young Verdi” must be a very clever man of business, or he must have come into the world with a silver spoon in his mouth. His popularity in Italy signifies nothing—but the reputation he elsewhere maintains is an enigma. We might overlook his ignorance of all the rules of art, were there in him any indication of natural feeling, or the shadow of inventive power—but alas! No—all is a dead flat—a dreary waste of barren emptiness!<sup>7</sup>

There was nothing in Verdi that would call for serious music criticism. The critic also deplored those aspects in Verdi’s work that *The Times* had judged more mildly, if not positively: the choirs and the concerted music. One week later, in its *Foreign Intelligence* column, *The Musical World* published a report from Paris, the author of which indulged in a nasty description of Verdi’s success in the French capital. Verdi was defined as “a humble imitator of [Pietro Antonio] Coppola, who is a humble imitator of [Luigi] Ricci, who is a humble imitator of [Gaetano] Donizetti, who is a very humble imitator of [Vincenzo] Bellini, who nourished himself on the rinsings of [Gioacchino] Rossini’s medicine bottles.”<sup>8</sup> His ideas were said to be “scant and vulgar, his instrumentation noisy, unmeaning, and thin, and his general musicianship that of the merest tyro.”<sup>9</sup> The reporter, having attended a performance of *Il proscritto* (alias *Ernani*) at the Théâtre-Italien, was in a position to claim that if *Nabucco* was bad, *Ernani* was “decidedly worse.”<sup>10</sup> The critic took a stance against his colleagues from the “philosophical *Times*, the sensible *Herald*, the artist-like *Daily News*, and the fashionable *Post*,” who were unreasonably exalting this unworthy composer.

When on 12 May *I Lombardi’s* was performed at Her Majesty’s Theatre, the critic of *The Musical World* decided to defer a critical opinion of its musical merit until the indisposition of Luciano Fornasari

7 *The Musical World*, March 7, 1846, p. 105.

8 “Foreign Intelligence,” *The Musical World*, March 14, 1846, p. 122. The article is not signed, but the initials “D. B.” appear at its end. Unfortunately, the author hiding behind initials has not been identified. See Richard Kitson, *The Musical World 1836–1865*, I: ix–xix.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

passed; the absence of a single interpreter, the critic wants us to believe, was reason enough to prevent him from forming an opinion about the work at large. However, he felt compelled to give a short summary of the libretto.<sup>11</sup> When reviewing Bellini's *Norma*, given at Her Majesty's Theatre on 2 May, the critic drew a comparison between the young Verdi and his much worthier predecessors Rossini and Donizetti: "The music of Bellini, like that of Donizetti, though pale by the side of the dazzling Rossini, is perfectly refreshing after the stale insipidities and heavy common-places of 'young Verdi.'" <sup>12</sup> Davison shared with Chorley a sentiment of deep appreciation towards Rossini and did not disdain the music of Donizetti and Bellini. Verdi, however, went beyond his forbearance.

Of much milder opinion was the critic of *The Times*, where an ample review of *Nino* made its appearance on 4 March 1846. The critic, perhaps Charles Kenney, reported on the circumstances that had led to the revised libretto and described both the dramatic plot and its musical treatment in quite milder, positive terms. Such adjectives as "beautiful" and "remarkable" were employed repeatedly to define their quality. The review concluded with a final remark suggestive of the favourable reception among operagoers, due especially to the effect produced by the orchestra and the massive choirs.

The concerted pieces, on which the opera depends more than on the solos, went off remarkably well, and the work was received with a stronger feeling of approbation than has been displayed on the production of any new Italian opera for a long time. The melodies are not remarkable, but the rich instrumentation, and the effective massing of the voices, do not fail to produce their impression, and a "run" for some time may be confidently predicted.<sup>13</sup>

On 13 May, *The Times* published another appreciative review of *I Lombardi*, its critic elucidating the reasons for the opera's international reputation: "While it has all that effective dramatic colouring, that contrasting management of choruses, and that skilful use of his orchestra on which his fame—such as it is—rests, it has much more

---

11 *The Musical World*, May 16, 1846, p. 229.

12 *The Musical World*, May 2, 1846, p. 191.

13 *The Times*, March 4, 1846, p. 5.

striking melody than most of his compositions."<sup>14</sup> After the customary perusal of the dramatic plot, the critic went through each moment of the opera and expressed himself in positive terms with regard to both the music and the performers. In the first act "Giselda (Giulia Grisi) sings (and very charmingly) a beautiful *Preghiera*, lightly accompanied by the orchestra." In the second act "The appearance of Oronte (Giovanni Matteo Mario), the tyrant's son, introduces the 'gem' of the opera, the beautiful song in which the young Turk expresses his love for Giselda, who has been carried off from her father, and is now in Antioch." Later on, the critic notes, "we have a chorus of female voices, with a very pretty accompaniment in the Eastern style, which gives a distinctive character to the piece." In the third act "comes a beautiful duet by Grisi and Mario, which may almost rival Mario's aria in the second," while the "dying scene gives occasion to a most delightful trio, in which the plaintive languid song of Mario and the passionate grief of Grisi combine with exquisite effect." Finally, in the fourth act "the waking Giselda expresses her feelings in a short but effective *scena*" and "a beautiful chorus of Crusaders shortly before the conclusion was an encore."<sup>15</sup> In sum, not a single word of reproach was uttered by the critic of *The Times* with regard to either the music of *I Lombardi* or its composer.

Even more positive were the comments that appeared in *The Illustrated London News*. The critic was far from convinced that the high degree of novelty achieved in both *Nino* and *I Lombardi* should be understood in negative terms; in fact, strong dramatic passion and a marked individuality in the vocal and dramatic treatment of the characters represented progress in the opera. Rather than raising the issue of vocal abuse, he made precise reference to the admirable effect that the voice produced when expressing strong dramatic feelings. Testament to this effect was Giulia Sanchioli's rendition of Abigail in *Nino*, especially in the second scene of the second act, where she pronounced the words "Tutti i popoli vedranno," and in the final duet where "The burst of sound poured forth by Mademoiselle Sanchioli's powerful voice, are admirably expressive of the contrast of feeling between the dethroned monarch."<sup>16</sup> Verdi's most remarkable characteristic, the critic

---

14 *The Times*, May 13, 1846, p. 4.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *The Illustrated London News*, March 14, 1846, p. 175.

maintained, was the manner in which individuality of character was preserved by the music itself. *The Illustrated London News* was by far the most appreciative of the journals: "In fine, in the music of the opera the composer has shown himself possessed of all the legitimate sources of success. It bears the stamp of genius and deep thought, and its effect upon the public proved that its merits were appreciated."<sup>17</sup>

On 16 May, an ample review of *I Lombardi* was published in the columns of the same periodical. Verdi's new opera was immediately pronounced a success "complete and brilliant; and deservedly so, for its beauties are of no common order."<sup>18</sup> Again, the critic acknowledged the degree of novelty involved in the work and invited his readers to think of it as defying the traditional notion of opera. *I Lombardi* should rather be understood as "a lyrical, dramatic, and pictorial poem, illustrating the character, habits, and manners of the first Crusaders, and bringing us on to the deeply interesting scene of their exploits."<sup>19</sup> Instead of entertaining the listener throughout with the hopes and fears, sighs and sobs of a pair of lovers, the opera presented a much more complex dramatic plot. All the *dramatis personae*, with their different personalities, feelings and passions interacted to the best advantage of the music, which changed in character and accommodated itself to the various situations. Later on in the same article, the critic insisted that the audience listen to this opera with different ears, since "a work of this stamp is to the common run of sentimental operas what a novel of Sir Walter Scott would be to a romance of that quondam favourite of school misses, Regina Maria Roche."<sup>20</sup> One single hearing of the opera was not sufficient to appreciate its merits, since the degree of novelty pursued by the composer was such that "the ear needs to become somewhat accustomed to a style so new."<sup>21</sup> Although he did not fail to detect "a somewhat too frequent employment of the brass instruments, and of declamatory phrases," especially in the first two acts, the critic was eager to show that, when the dramatic situation required, the composer was equally capable of assigning beautiful, graceful and

---

17 *The Illustrated London News*, March 14, 1846, also quoted in Crowest, *Verdi*, p. 44.

18 *The Illustrated London News*, May 16, 1846, p. 327.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

pathetic melodies to the voices. Hence, such talented interpreters as Grisi and Mario, impersonating Giselda and Oronte, were called upon to express both those stronger emotions, which required adequate vocal power, and those more intimate, sweeter feelings on which the voice could gently rest.

More assertively positive was the judgment expressed by the same critic later on in July when, upon repeated hearings of Verdi's music, he pronounced a more solidly grounded opinion.

We have again had an opportunity of hearing and judging Verdi's music—two of his operas having been given last week at this [Her Majesty's] Theatre; and with the greater effect that their massive music and splendid harmonies bring into relief the lighter compositions of the school which this composer and his follower bid fair to supplant. Of *Nino*, and *I Lombardi*, our opinion remains unaltered; though to the former composition we must give the palm of superiority, every time we hear it increasing our appreciation of the wonderful imagination and profound science, which characterise this operas as a true form of genius.<sup>22</sup>

The same attitude is visible in a later article, which was published at the conclusion of the opera season, on 15 August.

To obtain a perfectly correct judgment of the value of a work, and of its materials for lasting fame, we must wait till the first blush of novelty has passed off. Gratified curiosity, surprise, prejudice, and many other extraneous causes, may influence the first reception of any work of art; when these have passed away, it must stand or fall by its own merits.<sup>23</sup>

It was clear that Verdi's opera did not belong to that class of art works which, having outstripped the masterpieces of the greatest composers on first performance, vanished quickly and were soon forgotten. Nor did Verdi's arias sound similar to those bravura pieces that a singer could insert into any opera, so as to show off his or her voice. Verdi was a dramatic composer and his music, as *I Lombardi* demonstrated, was as powerful and strong as a drama by Shakespeare.

*I Lombardi* is, perhaps, the most essentially dramatic composition of Verdi—it is certainly not, in other respects his best. There are *morceaux* in *Nino* and *Ernani* far surpassing anything in this opera; but *I Lombardi*

---

22 *The Illustrated London News*, July 4, 1846, p. 14.

23 *The Illustrated London News*, August 15, 1846, p. 106.

has the superiority in dramatic power. In this respect, the genius of the composer here stands pre-eminently forward, for the plot on which he was to work is confused and altogether mediocre. He seized upon its redeeming points—its Eastern locality, rich with deeply interesting associations, and the numbers it brought on the stage. Murder, love, revenge, remorse, penitence, zeal—all the passions of the human breast—he has brought into prominence by music eminently calculated to express each in turn, and to contrast them with each other; he threw a rich colouring over the whole, and thus produced a most remarkable work, and one which no doubt enjoy a continued popularity.<sup>24</sup>

The controversial critical attitude that accompanied the reception of both *Nino* and *I Lombardi* was well registered by the manager of Her Majesty's Theatre, Benjamin Lumley, in his *Reminiscences*. In his account of *I Lombardi* he reported that the opera was a great and noisy success, although a doubtful one, in opposition to the relative unanimity of praise with which *Nabucco* had been received. The two opposite parties had confronted each other on the basis of argumentations that were similar in content but opposite in value.

Whilst, by the Anti-Verdians, *I Lombardi* was declared to be flimsy, trashy, worthless; the Verdi party, and the adherents of the modern school, pronounced it to be full of power, vigour and originality. The one portion asserted that it was utterly devoid of melody—the other, that it was replete with melody of the most charming kind; the one again insisted that it was the worst work of the aspirant—the other, that it was the young composer's *chef-d'oeuvre*.<sup>25</sup>

In the midst of the conflict—Lumley added—the public seemed undecided and wavering, hesitating between novelty and tradition. However, on 13 May 1846 Lumley wrote to Verdi announcing the success of *I Lombardi* in London in unconditional terms, perhaps in the hope that the good news would encourage the composer to undertake the composition of a new opera for his theatre as soon as his health would allow him.

Je viens vous annoncer que j'ai donné hier *I Lombardi* avec un succès de vrai enthousiasme. Tous les plus grands personnages de l'Angleterre étaient présents, sans excepter la Reine Douairière les Princes et les

---

24 *Ibid.*

25 Lumley, *Reminiscences*, pp. 148–49.

Princesses du sang. Les applaudissements ont été unanimes et je ne doute pas qu'à chaque représentation la vogue augmentera.<sup>26</sup>

Chorley and Davison conceptualised Verdi's first compositional and dramatic achievements in relation to the model provided by Rossini, Cimarosa and Paisiello, whom they now considered as imperishable classics. In Chorley's case, this attitude was consistent with that wider mind-set that led him to prefer Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven and even Weber to Meyerbeer, Berlioz and Schumann. Chorley thought Verdi to be poor in the expression of original and dramatic melody and, like Meyerbeer, to produce effects instead by the "clothing of his thoughts," which was to say by pointless ostentation. He expressed regret for the palmy days of the past and reproach for the unnatural way in which music composition was progressing. Chorley disliked modern bloody plots and showed strong aversion to those fashionable romantic dramas that provided librettists with the unworthy fabric for their scripts. Those music devices now dear to Verdi and his contemporaries, although consistent with the choice of the dramas and the quality of the librettos, involved dramatising the style at the expense of the much cherished *bel canto*. This made the critic long for earlier operas in which the beauty and freshness of genuine melody prevailed over all that was superfluous. Chorley's orientation with regard to Verdi was consistent with his dislike for Berlioz, at whom he had also wagged his finger. Berlioz had failed to continue and develop in the line of his most noble predecessors. In Chorley's eyes, neither Berlioz's nor Verdi's compositional achievements represented progress since, like Schumann, instead of assimilating the models of their greatest forerunners both in the symphonic and the dramatic genres, and instead of continuing to work in the direction they had indicated, all three seemed to have devoted themselves to devising musical ideas of which the most typical feature was awkwardness.

---

26 "I just informed you that yesterday I presented *I Lombardi* to resounding success. All the great figures of England were there, not excepting the Dowager Queen and the Princes and Princesses of royal blood. The applause was unanimous, and I don't doubt that with each performance its popularity will increase." Gaetano Cesari, Alessandro Luzio and Michele Scherillo (eds.), *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan: Commissione, 1913), pp. 21–22, available at <https://archive.org/details/icopialettere00verd>

Davison did not fail to seize each and every opportunity to make harsh and gratuitously offensive comments at the expense of the Italian composer in *The Musical World*. He did this to an extent that would be considered intolerable today in a journal claiming credibility and serious commitment. To Davison, Verdi's operas were devoid of any value and did not deserve serious criticism.

At the other end of the scale lay *The Illustrated London News*, whose critic's arguments in favour of Verdi are coloured by a high degree of appreciation, and which seem to reflect more closely the opinion of the general public. *The Times* was also quite positive and the degree of novelty represented by Verdi does not seem to have upset its critic, possibly still Charles Kenney. Positive reviews appeared also in the columns of *The Herald*, *The Daily News* and *The Post*.

However, 1846 witnessed a dramatic change in the critical orientations of *The Times*, for in August of that year James Davison, who had become editor and half proprietor of *The Musical World* in 1844, was appointed chief music critic of the journal.<sup>27</sup> The same person would be called upon to review the same events for two influential journals. This circumstance occasioned texts of quite diverse quality; the gap between the laconic composure that would characterise those which appeared in the columns of *The Times* and the overwhelming acrimony that distinguished the ones published in *The Musical World* is sometimes amazing.

---

27 Henry Davison, *Music during the Victorian Era. From Mendelssohn to Wagner: Being the Memoirs of J. W. Davison, Forty Years Music Critic of "The Times"* (London: Reeves, 1912), p. 64.