

Giuseppe Verdi
(1813-1901)

- 1813-1823 – The composer was born either on 9 or 10 October 1813 in the village of Le Roncole, near Busseto; at the time of his birth, he was technically a French citizen as a result of the French annexation of the duchies of Parma and Piacenza by Napoléon Bonaparte in 1808; the political unit that Le Roncole and Busseto belonged to at the time of Verdi's birth was known as the Département of Taro within the French Empire; in 1814, the former duchies of Parma and Piacenza were restored to be ruled by Napoléon's second wife, Marie-Louise, until her death in 1847; in later life, Verdi liked to portray himself as the son of illiterate peasants, but his parents were actually from families of small landowners and traders (his father Carlo was identified as an "innkeeper" in his birth registry); Verdi received his earliest education from local priests; he began playing the piano at age seven and became the organist at his local church at age nine
- 1823-1832 – In 1823 the Verdi family moved to Busseto, where the young composer entered the local gymnasium; his studies there were thorough and typical for the time in their emphasis on classical studies; in 1825 he began lessons with the local civic music director, Ferdinando Provesi, and received good grounding in every aspect of musical studies; in later life he tried to conceal this training, making it appear as though he was largely self-taught; Verdi was deeply involved in the musical life of Busseto as a performer, composer, and teacher; one of the types of music that he composed in great numbers was marches for band, a style that would appear in his operas for decades to come; in 1831 he moved into the home of a wealthy merchant and gave music lessons to his daughter, Margherita Barezzi; the two soon became unofficially engaged
- 1832-1836 – In 1832, with the financial support of Margherita Barezzi's father, Verdi traveled to Milan, the nearest major cultural center, to study at the conservatory there (which is now named for him); famously, he was refused admission, partly for technical reasons (such as his residence in the duchy of Parma, not the kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, where Milan was located) and had to study music and composition privately; Verdi considered this rejection a scarring humiliation for the rest of his life; Verdi's principal private teacher, Vincenzo Lavigna, offered him excellent training in counterpoint and encouraged him to attend operatic performances; he also introduced him to wealthy patrons in Milan; Verdi completed his studies with Lavigna in mid-1835
- 1836-1839 – After Provesi died, Verdi returned to Busseto and claimed Provesi's post as a music director; the same year, 1836, he married Margherita Barezzi; two children were born to the couple while in Busseto, Virginia (1837-1838) and Icilio (1838-1839); although Verdi performed his musical duties in Busseto conscientiously, he always harbored greater ambitions; he continued to cultivate connections in Milan with the aim of arranging a production of his first opera; he resigned his post as music director in October 1838, then moved to Milan in February 1839
- 1839-1847 – Verdi's early operatic career was centered in Milan, a very intense period of writing that was constantly complicated with difficult negotiations among librettists and theatrical managers; his first opera, *Oberto*, was performed at La Scala with sufficient success that the impresario there offered Verdi a contract for three more operas; but the first in the series, the comic opera *Un giorno di regno*, was a disaster at its première in September 1840; the year 1840 was also marred by the tragic death of his wife in June (in the space of two years, his entire family was wiped out); the shock did slow down the composer's productivity greatly, but when he came out of his period of lethargy, he was able to enjoy the success of *Nabucco*, a true breakthrough work; *Nabucco* became notably popular in Europe after its première in Milan in March 1842; from this time until his composition of *La traviata* in March 1853, Verdi produced sixteen operas, the most concentrated period in 1844-47, when he composed eight; he traveled constantly from operatic center to operatic center, but always returned to Milan and Busseto to recover (his health was

much affected by the intense pressure he was under); Verdi's popularity grew to the point that he was able to demand unprecedented fees for his work, and he began to accrue considerable wealth and property; Verdi's first trip outside of Italy brought him to Vienna in 1843

1847-1853 - In his personal life, Verdi began a love affair sometime in the mid-1840s with an opera singer whose career was in decline, Giuseppina Strepponi; they lived together without benefit of marriage for many years, a scandal that engendered much disapproval in Busseto and throughout Italy; Verdi's growing reputation made possible trips to London and Paris in 1847; he lived with Strepponi in Paris for about two years, then returned with her to Busseto; in 1851, they moved to a permanent home on the estate of Sant'Agata near Busseto; beginning in 1846, Verdi's sympathy with the political movement to unify Italy started to become well known, and he came to be regarded as a national hero; the crowning artistic achievements from this time are the operas *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* (1853), and *La traviata* (1853), all of them staples of the operatic repertory to the present day

1853-1871 – Verdi's production of operatic works lessened considerably after the completion of *La traviata* (only six new operas appeared between 1855 and 1871); Verdi even seems to have resolved to retire as an operatic composer in 1858; he spent more and more time away from musical centers, and he actually initiated a political career (at the urging of prominent statesmen, he served as a deputy in the new Italian parliament from 1861-65); his completion of two works for the Opéra in Paris led him to take on long periods of residence there (1854-55, 1866-67), but he also traveled to Paris, Russia, London, and Madrid in the early 1860s, and occasionally to various cities in Italy; when not traveling, he concentrated his time at the estate of Sant'Agata (which he was continuously expanding and improving); he married Giuseppina Strepponi in secret in a village near Geneva, Switzerland, in 1859; after 1866, they frequently wintered in Geneva; the operas from this period are generally considered to be of less-high quality than the three great operas of the early 1850s, and are certainly not as frequently performed with the exception of *Aïda*; although popularly believed to have been composed to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, it was actually the result of nothing more than an ordinary commission from Isma'il Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt; it was first performed in Cairo in December 1871 without Verdi present, but its enormous popularity derives from the first Italian performance (Milan, 1872), which Verdi supervised carefully

1871-1879 – Verdi left the appearance of retiring from operatic composition after his completion of *Aïda*; nonetheless, he did finish his famous *Requiem* in 1874, his only non-operatic composition that is frequently performed today; much of Verdi's time was taken up with the supervision of productions of his earlier operas and the *Requiem* throughout Europe; his personal life was disrupted considerably (and fresh public scandal erupted) as a result of his relationship with the Czech singer Teresa Stolz, the original *Aïda* in the Milan production of 1872; it is not known whether they were actually ever engaged in a love affair, but Verdi's closeness to her offended Giuseppina Strepponi; after a domestic crisis in 1876, there was an agreement that Stolz would remain a friend of Verdi's with Strepponi's acquiescence

1879-1901 – In 1879, the possibility of composing an operatic version of Shakespeare's *Othello* was suggested to Verdi by the composer and librettist Arrigo Boïto and music publisher Giulio Ricordi; busy with various projects to revise earlier operas, this project was not completed until 1887, with highly satisfactory results; another Shakespeare adaptation of Arrigo Boïto, in this case of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, was then completed as *Falstaff* in 1893, also a notable success at its first performance; Verdi continued to develop his properties in old age and contribute significantly to charitable institutions; Strepponi died in 1897, after which Stolz became his companion; Verdi died of a stroke in Milan in 1901; the musical commemoration of his death organized by Arturo Toscanini in Milan drew one of the largest public crowds ever assembled in Italy

The Operas of Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

(dates are of first performance)

Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio – “dramma” in 2 acts (Milan, La Scala, 17 November 1839) – libretto by Temistocle Solera based on an earlier libretto by Antonio Piazza – set in Bassano, northern Italy, at the castle of Ezzelino da Romano in 1228

Un giorno di regno (“King for a Day”) – a “melodramma giocoso” in 2 acts (Milan, La Scala, 5 September 1840) – libretto by Felice Romani, based on the play *Le faux Stanislas* by Alexandre-Vincent Pineux Duval (1808) – set in Brest, France, near the castle of Baron Kelbar in 1733

Nabucco [full title *Nabucodonosor*] (“Nebuchadnezzar”) – a “dramma lirica” in 4 acts (Milan, La Scala, 9 March 1842) – libretto by Temistocle Solera, based on the Old Testament books of 2 Kings, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Daniel, a play of 1836 by Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu, and a ballet adaptation by Antonio Cortese given at La Scala in 1836 – set in Jerusalem and Babylon in 587 B.C.

I lombardi all prima crociata (“The Lombards at the First Crusade”) – a “dramma lirico” in 4 acts (Milan, La Scala, 11 February 1843; as *Jérusalem*, Paris, Salle Le Peletier of the Paris Opera, 26 November 1847) – libretto by Temistocle Solera based on an epic poem of Tommaso Grassi – set in Milan and the environs of Antioch and Jerusalem during the period 1095-99 A.D.

Ernani – a “dramma lirico” in 4 acts (Venice, La Fenice, 9 March 1844) - libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on the play *Hernani* (1830) by Victor Hugo – set in Aragon, Aachen, and Zaragoza in 1519

I due Foscari – a “dramma lirico” in 3 acts (Rome, Teatro Argentina, 3 November 1844) – libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on the play *The Two Foscari* (1821) by Lord Byron – set in Venice in 1457

Giovanna d'Arco (“Joan of Arc”) – a “dramma lirico” with a prologue and 3 acts (Milan, La Scala, 15 February 1845) – libretto by Temistocle Solera based on the play *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801) by Friedrich von Schiller – set in Domrémy, Reims, and the environs of Rouen in 1429

Alzira – a “tragedia lirica” with a prologue and 2 acts (Naples, San Carlo, 12 August 1845) – libretto by Salvatore Cammarano based on the play *Alzire, ou les Américains* (1736) by Voltaire – set in Peru in the 16th century

Attila – a “dramma lirico” with a prologue and 2 acts (Venice, La Fenice, 17 March 1846) – libretto by Temistocle Solera based on the play *Attila, König der Hunnen* (1809) by

Zacharias Werner – set in Aquilea, the Adriatic lagoons, and the environs of Rome in 452 A.D.

Macbeth – a “melodramma” in 4 acts (Florence, La Pergola, 14 March 1847; revised version, Paris, Théâtre-Lyrique, 21 April 1865) – libretto by Francesco Maria Piave with additions by Andrea Maffei based on the play *Macbeth* (1606) by William Shakespeare – set in Scotland in the 11th century

I masnadieri (“The Robbers”) – a “melodrama” in 4 acts (London, Her Majesty’s Theatre, 22 July 1847) – libretto in 4 acts by Andrea Maffei based on the play *Die Räuber* (1781) by Friedrich Schiller – set in Germany between 1755 and 1757

Il corsaro (“The Pirate”) – an opera in 3 acts (Trieste, Teatro Grande, 25 October 1848) – libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on the poem *The Corsair* (1814) by Lord Byron – set in a Greek island in the Aegean Sea and the Turkish city of Corone in the early 1800s

La battaglia di Legnano (“The Battle of Legnano”) – a “tragedia lirica” in 4 acts (Rome, Teatro Argentina, 27 January 1849) – libretto by Salvatore Cammarano based on the play *La bataille de Toulouse* (1836) of Joseph Méry – set in Milan and Como in 1176

Luisa Miller – a “melodramma tragico” in 3 acts (Naples, San Carlo, 8 December 1849) – libretto by Salvatore Cammarano based on the play *Kabale und Liebe* (1784) by Friedrich Schiller – set in Tyrol in the early 17th century

Stiffelio – an opera in 3 acts (Trieste, Teatro Grande, 16 November 1850; revised version as *Aroldo*, Rimini, Teatro Nuovo, 16 August 1857) – libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on the novel *Le pasteur d’hommes* (1838) by Émile Souvestre – set in the environs of Salzburg in the early 19th century

Rigoletto – a “melodramma” in 3 acts (Venice, La Fenice, 11 March 1851) – libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on the play *Le roi s’amuse* (1832) by Victor Hugo – set in Mantua in the 16th century

Il trovatore (“The Troubadour”) – a “dramma” in 4 acts (Rome, Teatro Apollo, 19 January 1853) – libretto by Salvatore Cammarano based on the play *El trovador* (1836) by Antonio García Gutiérrez – set in Biscay and Aragon in the 15th century

La traviata (“The Fallen One”) – an opera in 3 acts (Venice, La Fenice, 6 March 1853) – libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on the play *La dame aux camélias* (1852) by Alexandre Dumas fils, based in turn on his 1848 novel of the same name – for the first performance, the opera was set in 17th-century Paris at the insistence of the management of the Teatro La Fenice, but later stagings have traditionally been in Paris contemporary with the setting of the novel of 1848

I vespri siciliani (“The Sicilian Vespers”) – a “dramma” in 5 acts (originally *Les vêpres siciliennes*, Paris, Salle Le Peletier of the Paris Opera, 13 June 1855; first Italian version

as *Giovanna de Guzman*, Parma, Teatro Regio, 26 December 1855) – libretto by Eugène Scribe and Charles Duveyrier based on their unproduced libretto *Le duc d'Albe* (1838), which was based on the medieval Sicilian literary source *Lu rebellamentu di Sichilia* – set in Palermo in 1282

Simon Boccanegra – an opera with a prologue and 3 acts (Venice, La Fenice, 12 March 1857; revised version, Milan, La Scala, 24 March 1881) – libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on the play *Simón Bocanegra* (1843) by Antonio García Gutiérrez – set in the environs of Genoa in the middle of the 14th century

Un ballo in maschera (“A Masked Ball”) – a “melodramma” in 3 acts (Rome, Teatro Apollo, 17 February 1859) – libretto by Antonio Somma, based on the libretto *Gustave III, ou le bal masqué* (1833) by Eugène Scribe as set to music by Daniel Auber – originally set in 17th-century colonial Boston, but since the 20th century, traditionally set in Stockholm in 1792, the venue of the assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden

La forza del destino (“The Force of Destiny”) – an opera in 4 acts (St. Petersburg, Bolshoi Kamenny Teatr, 10 November 1862; revised version, Milan, La Scala, 27 February 1869) – libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on the play *Don Álvaro o la fuera del sino* (1835) by Ángel de Saavedra – set in Spain and Italy ca. 1750

Don Carlo – a “grand opera” in 5 acts (Paris, Salle Le Peletier of the Paris Opera, 11 March 1867; revised version, Milan, La Scala, 27 February 1884) – libretto by Joseph Méry and Camille du Locle based on the play *Don Karlos, Infant von Spanien* (1787) by Friedrich Schiller and the play *Philippe II, roi d'Espagne* (1846) by Eugène Cormon – set in Fontainebleau, France, in 1559 and Spain in 1568

Aïda – an opera in 4 acts (Cairo, Khedivial Opera House, 24 December 1871) – libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni based on disputed literary sources – set in the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt (the period ca. 2700-2200 B.C.)

Otello – a “dramma lirico” in 4 acts (Milan, La Scala, 5 February 1887) – libretto by Arrigo Boito based on the play *Othello* (1603) by William Shakespeare – set in Cyprus in the 16th century

Falstaff – a “commedia lirica” in 3 acts (Milan, La Scala, 9 February 1893) – libretto by Arrigo Boito based on the play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (perhaps 1597) and scenes from the play *Henry IV, Part 1* (by 1597) and *Part 2* (late 1590s), by William Shakespeare – set in Windsor, England, during the reign of King Henry IV (1399-1413)

In the early 1890s, Verdi seriously considered preparing an operatic version of the play *La Tosca* (1887) by the French playwright Victorien Sardou but felt that he was too old to proceed with the project. Moreover, he wanted a different ending to the story than what was found in the original play. In 1894, he was instrumental in promoting Giacomo Puccini as the composer who would set it as an opera (first performed in 1900).

Some Noteworthy Operas by 19th-Century Italian Composers

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868):

La scala di seta (1812)
Tancredi (1813)
L'italiana in Algeri (1813)
Il barbiere di Siviglia (1816)
Otello (1816)
La Cenerentola (1817)
La gazza ladra (1817)
La donna del lago (1819)
Semiramide (1823)
Le siège de Corinthe (1826)
Guillaume Tell (1829)

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848):

Anna Bolena (1830)
L'elisir d'amore (1832)
Lucrezia Borgia (1833)
Lucia di Lammermoor (1835)
Maria Stuarda (1835)
Roberto Devereux (1837)
La favorite (1840)
La fille du régiment (1840)
Maria Padilla (1841)
Linda di Chamounix (1842)
Don Pasquale (1843)

Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835):

I Capuleti e i Montecchi (1830)
Norma (1831)
La sonnambula (1831)
Beatrice di Tenda (1833)
I puritani (1835)

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1893):

Oberto (1839)
Un giorno di regno (1840)
Nabucco (1842)
I lombardi (1843)
Ernani (1844)

I due Foscari (1844)
Giovanna d'Arco (1845)
Alzira (1845)
Attila (1846)
Macbeth (1847)
I masnadieri (1847)
Il corsaro (1848)
La battaglia di Legnano (1849)
Luisa Miller (1849)
Stiffelio (1850)
Rigoletto (1851)
Il trovatore (1853)
La traviata (1853)
I vespri siciliani (1856)
Simon Boccanegra (1857)
Un ballo in maschera (1859)
La forza del destino (1862)
Don Carlos (1867)
Aïda (1871)
Otello (1887)
Falstaff (1893)

Other notable Italian operas of the late 19th century:

Arrigo Boïto (1842-1918): *Mefistofele* (1868)

Amilcare Ponchielli (1834-1886): *La Gioconda* (1876)

Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945): *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890)

Ruggiero Leoncavallo (1858-1919): *Pagliacci* (1892)

Alfredo Catalani (1854-1893): *La Wally* (1892)

Umberto Giordano (1867-1948): *Andrea Chénier* (1896)
Fedora (1898)

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924): *Manon Lescaut* (1893)
La bohème (1896)
Tosca (1900)
Madama Butterfly (1904)
La fanciulla del West (1910)
La rondine (1917)
Il trittico (1918): *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi*
Turandot (1926)

Notable Predecessors of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi

Paisiello, Giovanni (1740-1816), prolific author of comic and serious operas, none of which are commonly performed today; he is now known mainly as the author of the original setting of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1782), based on a play of Beaumarchais; a legend holds that the setting was so revered that Rossini was considered disrespectful for composing a setting of his own and was jeered for this at the first performance, when Paisiello was still alive

Cimarosa, Domenico (1749-1801), author of *Il matrimonio segreto* (1792) and many other works, both serious and comic, but remembered in Rossini's day mainly for his mastery of comic style

Cherubini, Luigi (1760-1842), a fixture of musical life in Paris for most of his adult life; in modern times he is best known for *Médée* (1797), a favorite vehicle of Maria Callas

Mayr, Simone (1763-1845), of Bavarian origin, a leading composer of serious opera in Italy in the early nineteenth century; known today mainly as the teacher of Donizetti

Fioravanti, Valentino (1764-1837), a notable composer of comic opera at the beginning of the nineteenth century

Farinelli, Giuseppe (1769-1836), one of the most popular composers of Italian comic opera in the decades just before the emergence of Rossini, considered an imitator of Cimarosa; named himself for the famous castrato Farinelli, one of his important early mentors

Paer, Ferdinando (1771-1839), noted in his day for his operas that mix comic and serious action; none of his operas are frequently performed today

Spontini, Gaspare (1774-1851), prominent in the generation just before Rossini's emergence, he left Italy as a young man to pursue his career in Paris; the only work of Spontini much heard of today is *La vestale* (1807), a serious opera written in Paris

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The Bel-Canto Operas of Giuseppe Verdi

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Giovanna d'Arco (1845)
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Il corsaro (1848)
La battaglia di Legnano (1849)
Luisa Miller (1849)
Stiffelio (1850)
Rigoletto (1851)
Il trovatore (1853)
La traviata (1853)

Lesser Composers of Italian Opera in Bel-Canto Style

Michele Carafa (1787-1872)

Meyerbeer, Giacomo (1791-1864), best known for his contributions to the development of French *grand opéra* in Paris, but in his early years (1810s -20s) a fluent master of bel-canto style in Italy

Saverio Mercadante (1795-1870)

Giovanni Pacini (1796-1867)

Cesare Pugni (1805-1870), a mainstay of musical life in St. Petersburg, Russia

Some Characteristics of Operas Composed During the *Bel Canto* Period, ca. 1810s-1850s

Basic Definition of *Bel Canto*:

“Bel Canto” means “beautiful song” in Italian; as a means of defining operatic style, the most important characteristic the term denotes is the cultivation of a very florid vocal technique with quick, difficult scales, arpeggios, trills, and other types of ornaments, a style of figuration referred to as “coloratura”; *Bel Canto* is primarily an Italian operatic genre, but it was imitated by French, German, English, and Russian composers of operas and lighter varieties of music drama

Principal Composers:

Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868), Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848), Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835), and Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), however Verdi gradually abandoned *Bel Canto* style beginning in the 1850s in synchronization with general operatic trends throughout Europe

Miscellaneous Characteristics:

Bel Canto operas may be in serious or comic style; serious operas were typically set in the distant past (centuries, if not millennia, before the time they were written); comic operas were almost always much more contemporary; comic operas are always love intrigues that resolve into happy marriages; serious operas written before ca. 1830 usually end in happy marriages as well, but after ca. 1830, the love intrigues typically end tragically, almost always with the death of one or both romantic partners

Few, if any, musical motives recur after they are used in the musical numbers where they first appear, unlike in the later nineteenth-century, when it was common for musical motives to appear repeatedly, often with a symbolic meaning attached. Musical interest centers on the voice; orchestral accompaniments are often simple.

Bel Canto operas are “numbers” operas; in other words, they are made up of a series of self-contained musical “numbers” that have a clear start and clear ending and can be detached from the opera for concert use, deleted if necessary, or substituted; the types of pieces can be referred to as “musical building blocks” as follows:

Recitatives (an approximation of musical speech in song with no repetition of words, no memorable melodies, and little element of virtuosity; recitative is used to narrate the basic story line of an opera and set up emotional situations that are the basis of arias and other vocal pieces)

Arias (extended vocal pieces for a soloist in which a character thoroughly airs his or her feelings at a given point during an opera; there is frequent repetition of text and the musical materials are intended to be interesting and memorable; often the element of virtuosity is prominent); spectacular slow-fast constructions known as cavatina/cabaletta pairings were much favored by audiences of the time

Duets (sometimes two characters, especially lovers, express their emotions at the same time; in love duets, it is common for the partners to express their feelings individually at first, then sing in tandem to demonstrate their emotional synchronization)

Ensembles (vocal pieces for three or more characters, often in a fluid depiction of dramatic action)

Choruses