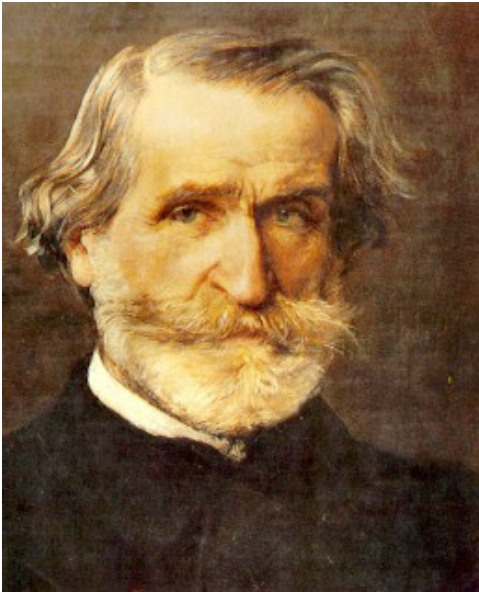


ALLA CORRENTE

Giuseppe Verdi

This October, the opera world celebrates the 200th Anniversary of Verdi's birth. In keeping with this celebration, this month's "Alla Corrente" describes aspects of the life of Verdi.



Giuseppe Verdi

October 9/10, 1813–January 27, 1901

He was born Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi in Le Roncole, Italy, a village near Busseto, then in the Département Taro, which was a part of the First French Empire after the annexation of the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza. His father was Carlo Verdi and his mother was Luigia Uttini. The baptismal register, dated October 11, lists him as being “born yesterday”, but since days were often considered to begin at sunset, this could have meant either October 9 or October 10. The day after that (Tuesday), Verdi’s father took his newborn boy the three miles to Busseto, where the baby was recorded as Joseph Fortunin François; the clerk wrote in French. There are numerous rumors and exaggerated stories surrounding Verdi’s family and childhood. Though Verdi has said his parents were poor, uneducated peasants, his father was actually a land-owning innkeeper, and his mother was a spinner. When he was still a child, Verdi’s parents moved from Le Roncole to Busseto, where the future composer’s education was greatly facilitated by visits to the large library belonging to the local Jesuit school.

When he was seven years old, his father gave him a small gift, his first musical instrument—a spinet. Verdi had expressed a love and fascination for music to which his father kindly obliged. Several years later, the spinet was repaired for free by a local harpsichord maker who was impressed by Verdi’s good disposition.

It was in Busseto that Verdi was given his first lessons in composition. Having excelled in music, he was introduced to Ferdinando Provesi, maestro of the local Philharmonic. For several years, Verdi studied with Provesi and was given the position of assistant conductor. When Verdi turned 20, having learned a strong foundation in composition and instrumental proficiency, he set out for Milan to attend the renowned conservatory of music there. After arriving there, he was quickly turned away—he was two years older than the age limit. Still determined to study music, he took matters into his own hands and located Vincenzo Lavigna, who had been once a harpsichordist for La Scala. Verdi studied counterpoint with Lavigna for three years. Apart from his studies, he attended operatic performances and concerts, often of specifically German music. His experiences and acquaintances in Milan also convinced him that he should pursue a career as a theatre composer, so during the mid-1830s, he attended the Salotto Maffei salons in Milan, hosted by Clara Maffei.



*Spinet by Charles Haward, London, 1689.
(Pressler Gallery, National Music Museum,
NMM 10773)*

After spending several years in Milan, Verdi returned home to Busseto and became the town’s music master. His benefactor, Antonio Barezzi, who had eagerly supported his trip to Milan, arranged Verdi’s first public

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Giuseppe Verdi

performance in his own home. Barezzi also hired Verdi to teach music to his daughter, Margherita Barezzi. They fell in love and were married on May 4, 1836. Margherita gave birth to two children, Virginia Maria Luigia (March 26, 1837–August 12, 1838) and Icilio Romano (July 11, 1838–October 22, 1839). Both children died in infancy while Verdi was finishing his first opera. While this personal tragedy was taking place, Milan's La Scala produced his first opera, *Oberto*, in November 1839, which achieved a degree of success. Following this success, Bartolomeo Merelli, La Scala's impresario, offered Verdi a contract for three more works. However, soon after, on June 18, 1840, while working on his second opera (*Un giorno di Regno*), Margherita died of encephalitis at the age of 26. Verdi adored his wife and children and was utterly devastated by their deaths which had occurred over such a short period of time.

After the first performance of this second opera in September 1840, (which was a flop) Verdi fell into a deep depression and swore never to compose music again. However, Merelli persuaded him to write another opera. Verdi used the opportunity for work to come out of his depression, and the opening performance of *Nabucco* in March 1842 made Verdi famous. Legend (and Verdi's own *An Autobiographical Sketch* of 1879) has it that it was the words of the famous "Va, pensiero" chorus of the Hebrew slaves that inspired him to write music again.

A period of hard work—producing fourteen operas in all—followed in the fifteen years after 1843, right up through the composition of *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Verdi described this period of intense work in a letter he wrote to Countess Clara Maffei: "From Nabucco, you may say, I have never had one hour of peace. Sixteen years in the galleys." These included his *I Lombardi* in 1843, and *Ernani* in 1844. In 1847, *I Lombardi* was revised and renamed *Jérusalem*, and was produced by the Paris Opera. Due to a number of Parisian conventions that had to be honored (including extensive ballets), it became Verdi's first work in the French Grand Opera style. During this period he also composed *Macbeth* (1847), which was his first attempt to write an opera without a love story. This broke a basic convention of 19th-century Italian opera that there must be a love story in operas. These fourteen operas were tremendously successful and launched Verdi into operatic stardom.

Sometime in the mid-1840s, after the death of Margherita Barezzi, Verdi began a serious romantic relationship with one of his star sopranos, Giuseppina Strepponi, who was in the twilight of her singing career. Their cohabitation prior to marriage was regarded as a scandal in some of the places where they lived. Verdi and Giuseppina finally married on August 29, 1859 at Collonges-sous-Salève, in the Kingdom of Piemonte, near Geneva. Apart from dealing with the stress of his 'scandalous' affair, Verdi was also under close censorship from Austria, which occupied that part of Italy at the time. Verdi composed another masterpiece, *Rigoletto*, in 1853. Based on a play by Victor Hugo (*Le Roi s'Amuse*), the libretto had to undergo substantial revisions in order to satisfy the Austrian censors, and Verdi was on the verge of abandoning it a number of times. The operas that followed were equally magnificent: *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*.

In 1848, while living in Busseto with Strepponi, Verdi bought an estate two miles from the town. Initially, his parents lived there, but after his mother's death in 1851, he made the Villa Verdi at Sant'Agata in Villanova sull'Arda his home, which it remained until his death.



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ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued*

Giuseppe Verdi

In 1869, Verdi was asked to compose a section for a requiem Mass in memory of Gioachino Rossini which was to be a collection of sections composed by other Italian contemporaries of Rossini. The requiem was compiled and completed, but was cancelled at the last minute (and was not performed in Verdi's lifetime). Verdi blamed this on the lack of enthusiasm for the project by the intended conductor, Angelo Mariani, who had been a longtime friend of his. The episode led to a permanent break in their personal relationship.

Five years later, Verdi reworked his "Libera Me" section of the Rossini Requiem and made it a part of his *Requiem Mass*, honoring the famous novelist and poet Alessandro Manzoni, who had died in 1873. The complete *Requiem* was first performed at the cathedral in Milan on May 22, 1874. (*N.B.* This will be performed by a combined chorus of San Francisco Opera Chorus and Teatro di San Carlo Opera Chorus from Naples on October 25, 2013 in San Francisco, conducted by Maestro Nicola Luisotti).

Teresa Stolz was associated with both *Aida* and the *Requiem* (as well as a number of other Verdi roles). The role of *Aida* was written for her, and although she did not appear in the world premiere in Cairo in 1871, she created *Aida* in the European premiere in Milan in February, 1872. She was also the soprano soloist in the first and many later performances of the *Requiem*. It was widely believed that she and Verdi had an affair after she left Angelo Mariani. A Florence newspaper criticized them for this in five strongly worded articles. We may never know with certainty if there was any truth to these rumors. However, after Giuseppina Strepponi's death (November 1897), Teresa Stolz became a close companion of Verdi until his death.



Teresa Stolz
1834-1902

Verdi and Wagner, who were the leaders of their respective schools of music, seemed to resent each other greatly, although they never met. Verdi's comments on Wagner and his music are few, and those we know about are hardly benevolent. (For example: "He invariably chooses, unnecessarily, the untrodden path, attempting to fly where a rational person would walk with better results.") However, at least one of them is kind: upon learning of Wagner's death, Verdi lamented, "Sad, sad, sad! ...A name that will leave a most powerful impression on the history of art." Of Wagner's comments on Verdi, only one is well-known: after listening to Verdi's *Requiem*, the German composer, who was prolific and eloquent in his comments on some other composers, stated, "It would be best not to say anything."

Falstaff was Verdi's last opera, performed in 1893, and was only the second of his 28 operas to be a comedy. It was also the third of Verdi's operas to be based on a Shakespearean play, following his earlier *Macbeth* and *Otello*.

In 1897, Verdi completed his last composition, a setting of the traditional Latin text "Stabat Mater." This was the last of four sacred works that Verdi composed, *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*, which can be performed together or separately. They were not conceived as a unit; in fact, Verdi did not want the *Ave Maria* published since he considered it an exercise and not a finished work. The first performance of the four works was on April 7, 1898 at the Opéra, Paris.

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ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued*

Giuseppe Verdi

On July 29, 1900, King Umberto I of Italy was assassinated by Gaetano Bresci, a deed that horrified and depressed Verdi. Several months later, on January 21, 1901, while staying at the Grand Hotel de Milan, Verdi suffered a stroke. He gradually grew feebler and died nearly a week later, on January 27, 1901. Arturo Toscanini conducted the vast assemblage of combined orchestras and choirs composed of musicians from throughout Italy at Verdi's funeral service in Milan. To date, it remains the largest public assembly of any event in the history of Italy.

Much of Verdi's works were adored by the public. His fellow Italians would shout "Viva Verdi" at the end of every performance. His works represented a shared "anti-Austrian" sentiment during the Risorgimento and resonated throughout the country.

Verdi was one of the first composers who insisted on patiently seeking out plots to suit his particular talents. Working closely with his librettists, and well aware that dramatic expression was his forte, he made certain that the initial work upon which the libretto was based was stripped of all "unnecessary" detail and "superfluous" participants, and only characters brimming with passion and scenes rich in drama remained. Many of his operas, especially the later ones from 1851 onwards, are a staple of the standard operatic repertoire. With the possible exception of Giacomo Puccini, no composer of Italian opera has managed to match Verdi's popularity.

Adapted from an article by Aaron Green on About.com website (<http://classicalmusic.about.com/od/classicalcomposers/p/Giuseppe-Verdi.htm>) and from Wikipedia, by James J. Boitano, PhD.

VERDI'S OPERAS

(in Italian unless noted) and their date of première:

Oberto, 17 November 1839

Un giorno di regno, 5 September 1840

Nabucco, 9 March 1842

I Lombardi alla prima crociata, 11 February 1843

Ernani, 9 March 1844

I due Foscari, 3 November 1844

Giovanna d'Arco, 15 February 1845

Alzira, 12 August 1845

Attila, 17 March 1846

Macbeth, 14 March 1847

I masnadieri, 22 July 1847

Jérusalem (a revision and translation into French of I Lombardi alla prima crociata) 26 November 1847

Il corsaro, 25 October 1848

La battaglia di Legnano, 27 January 1849

Luisa Miller, 8 December 1849

Stiffelio, 16 November 1850

Rigoletto, 11 March 1851

Il trovatore, 19 January 1853

La traviata, 6 March 1853

Les vêpres siciliennes (in French), 13 June 1855

Simon Boccanegra (original version), 12 March 1857

Aroldo (A major revision and re-working of Stiffelio),
16 August 1857

Un ballo in maschera, 17 February 1859

La forza del destino, 10 November 1862

Macbeth (revised version, added music), 19 April 1865

Don Carlos (5 acts, in French), 11 March 1867

Aida, 24 December 1871

Simon Boccanegra (revised version), 24 March 1881

Otello, 5 February 1887

Falstaff, 9 February 1893