

## The 'Naïveté' of Verdi

for W. H. Auden

MY topic is Verdi's 'naïveté'. I hope that this phrase will not be misunderstood. To say that Verdi was naïve in any ordinary sense is an absurd suggestion. But it seems to me that he was so in a very special – now forgotten – sense, in which this term was once used by Friedrich Schiller. Verdi greatly admired Schiller's dramatic works, which inspired four of his operas. But it is not this – the affinity of Verdi and Schiller which has often been remarked – that I wish to discuss. My thesis is concerned with a different link between them.

In his once celebrated essay, published in 1795, which he called *Über Naïve und Sentimentalische Dichtung*,<sup>1</sup> Schiller distinguished two types of poets: those who are not conscious of any rift between themselves and their milieu, or within themselves; and those who are so conscious. For the first, art is a natural form of expression; they see what they see directly, and seek to articulate it for its own sake, not for any ulterior purpose, however sublime. Let me quote his own words:

Such poets occur in the youth of the world and later: they are severe and chaste, like the virgin goddess Diana in her woods . . . The dry, truthful way in which such a poet treats his material often resembles lack of feeling. The object possesses him entirely. His heart does not, like a cheap metal, lie on the very surface, but, like gold, must be sought in depths. He is concealed by his works like God by the world He has created. He is his work, for the work is himself. Only someone who is unworthy of a work, or does not understand it, or is satiated by it, will look in it only for the creator.<sup>2</sup>

Homer, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, even Goethe, are poets of this kind. They are not, as poets, self-conscious. They do not, like Virgil or Ariosto, stand aside to contemplate their creations and express their

<sup>1</sup> See *Schillers Werke*, ed. Ernst Jenny, vol. 10 (Basel, 1946), pp. 208–321.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 232.

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own feelings. They are at peace with themselves. Their aim is limited, and they are able, if they have genius, to embody their vision fully. These Schiller calls *naiv*. With them he contrasts those poets who come after the Fall. Let me quote again: 'When man enters the stage of culture, and art has laid its hand on him, the primordial, sensuous unity is gone . . . The harmony between sense and thinking, which in the earlier state was *real*, now exists only as an *ideal*. It is not *in* a man, as a fact of his life, but outside him, as an ideal to be realised.'<sup>1</sup> The unity has been broken. The poet seeks to restore it. He looks for the vanished, harmonious world which some call nature, and builds it from his imagination, and his poetry is his attempt to return to it, to an imagined childhood, and he conveys his sense of the chasm which divides the day-to-day world which is no longer his home from the lost paradise which is conceived only ideally, only in reflection. Hence this ideal realm is bounded by nothing; it is in its very essence indefinable, unattainable, incapable of being embraced by means of any finite medium, no matter how great the poet's capacity for finding, moulding, transforming his material. Let me quote Schiller again: 'Visual art reaches its goal in the finite; that of the imagination . . . in infinity.'<sup>2</sup> And again, 'The poet . . . *is* either himself nature, or he *seeks* her.'<sup>3</sup> The first of these, Schiller calls *naiv*, the second, *sentimentalisch*.

For Schiller as for Rousseau, once ideas enter, peace, harmony, joy, are gone for ever. The artist becomes conscious of himself, of his ideal aims, of their infinite distance from his own divided nature, that is, of the estrangement of his society and himself from the original and unbroken whole of thought and action, feeling and expression. The characteristic poetry of the 'sentimental' is satire, that is, negation, an attack on that which calls itself real life but is in fact a degradation of it (what is now called alienation from it), artificial, ugly and unnatural; or it is elegy – the affirmation of the lost world, the unrealisable ideal. This distinction is not at all the same as that between the classical and the romantic (whatever that may be), if only because it is not concerned with the presence or absence of objective rules, universal standards, fixed criteria, or an eternal ideal order. Aeschylus, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Ossian, the heroes of romanticism, condemned by the classical school as undisciplined and wild, are *naiv*; the models of classicism – the authors of dramatic, or idyllic, or satirical, or epic poetry – Euripides, Virgil, Horace, Propertius, the neo-

<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.* (p. 287, note 1 above), p. 238. <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 242. <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 237.

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classical poets of the Renaissance – are nostalgic, self-conscious, deeply *sentimentalisch*.

The naïve artist is happily married to his muse. He takes rules and conventions for granted, uses them freely and harmoniously, and the effect of his art is, in Schiller's words, 'tranquil, pure, joyous'. The sentimental artist is in a turbulent relationship to his muse: married to her unhappily. Conventions irk him, although he may defend them fanatically. He is Amfortas and seeks peace, salvation, the healing of his own or his society's secret and patent wounds. He cannot be at rest. Of him Schiller says:

His observation is forcibly pushed aside by fancy, his sensibility by ideas, he closes his eyes and ears so that nothing may disturb his self-absorption in his own thoughts . . . His soul suffers no impression without at once turning to contemplate its own play . . . In this manner we never receive the object itself, only what the reflective understanding of the poet made of the object; and even when the poet is himself this object, when he wants to portray his feelings to us, we do not apprehend his feelings directly, at first hand, but only their reflection in his soul, what he thought about them as a spectator of himself.<sup>1</sup>

Hence the effect of the sentimental artist is not joy and peace, but tension, conflict with nature or society, insatiable craving, the notorious neuroses of the modern age, with its troubled spirits, its martyrs, fanatics and rebels, and its angry, bullying subversive preachers, Rousseau, Byron, Schopenhauer, Carlyle, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Wagner, Marx, Nietzsche, offering not peace, but a sword.

Schiller's distinction, like all dichotomies, can, if taken literally, be carried much too far. But it is very original and very suggestive. If we ask whether in modern times there are artists who in Schiller's sense are naïve – at peace with their medium – integral as men and artists, as tranquil and solid and free from self-consciousness or obsession and fulfilled artistically as, say, Cervantes, Bach, Handel, Rubens, Haydn, men whose art culminates in its object and is not used for some spiritual end beyond itself – to reach out for some unattainable ideal, or as a weapon in a war against philistines and traitors, we could answer, 'Yes, indeed: Goethe, Pushkin, Dickens, at times Tolstoy (when he forgets his doctrine and his guilt), certainly these, Rossini and Verdi.' Among composers of genius, Verdi is perhaps the last complete, self-fulfilled creator, absorbed in his art; at one with it; seeking

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 257–8.

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to use it for no ulterior purpose, the god wholly concealed by his works, severe, farouche, like Schiller's Diana, suspicious of anyone curious about his inner life, wholly, even grimly, impersonal, dryly objective, at one with his music. A man who dissolved everything in his art, with no more personal residue than Shakespeare or Tintoretto. In Schiller's sense, the last great naïve poet of our time.

Of course, anyone who has any knowledge of Verdi's life knows that it was intertwined with that of his country: that his name became the very symbol of the Risorgimento, that 'Viva Verdi' (not for political or monarchist reasons alone) was the most famous revolutionary and patriotic cry in Italy: that he admired both Mazzini and Cavour, both the revolutionary democrats and the King, and in this way united in his person the diverse strands which made the Italian nation. He always (to use Herder's metaphor) lived near the centre of gravity of his nation, and spoke to his countrymen and for them, as no one else did, not even Manzoni or Garibaldi, to both of whom he was close. His convictions, whether they moved to the right or the left, moved with those of popular feeling; he responded deeply and personally to every twist and turn in the Italian struggle for unity and freedom. The Hebrews of *Nabucco* were Italians in captivity. *Va Pensiero* was the national prayer for resurrection. The performance of *Battaglia di Legnano* evoked scenes of indescribable popular excitement in the revolutionary Rome of 1849. *Rigoletto*, no less than *Don Carlo*, *Forza del Destino* and *Aida*, is inspired by a hatred of oppression, inequality, fanaticism and human degradation. The hymn which Verdi wrote for Mazzini is only an episode in a single great campaign. For half a century he was the living symbol of all that was most generous and universal in Italian national feeling.

All this is so. Nevertheless, it is not at the centre of Verdi's art. Insight into his music does not require us to know all, or any, of this. Of course all knowledge of what a man of genius was and felt is interesting, but it is not always essential. The point is, however, that it is essential in the case of the great 'sentimental' masters: no one who does not realise what Beethoven felt about tyranny can fully understand the *Eroica*, or *Fidelio*, the first great political opera; no one who is ignorant of the relevant social movements in Russia can understand the significance of *Boris Godunov*, or *Khovanshchina*. Schumann's aesthetic outlook, Wagner's mythology, the romantic theories that dominated Berlioz, are indispensable to the understanding of their masterpieces; but it is not necessary to know Shakespeare's

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political views to understand his historical plays; it might help, but it is not required. It is so with Verdi. Anyone who is acquainted with primary human passions: paternal love, and the full horror of the humiliation of men by other men in a dehumanised society, will understand *Rigoletto*; insight into a hero destroyed by jealousy is sufficient for understanding *Otello*. Knowledge of basic human emotions is virtually all the extra-musical equipment that is needed to understand Verdi's works, early or late, great or small, *Suoni la Tromba* as much as *La Traviata*; *Attila* or *Luisa Miller* no less than *Forza del Destino* or *Aida*; *Il Corsaro* or *Ernani* as much as *Il Trovatore*, the *Requiem* or *Otello*, or even *Falstaff*. *Falstaff* is musically and artistically absolutely unique. Nevertheless the requirements needed to do it justice do not include, as indispensable *sine quibus non*, knowledge of the personal views or attributes of the composer, or the historical circumstances of his life or those of his society. This is not needed in his case any more than in those of Bach or Mozart or Rossini, of Shakespeare or Goethe or Dickens. From *Oberto*, *Conte di Bonifazio* to the *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*, the character of Verdi's creations is, in Schiller's special sense, wholly *naiv*: they spring from a direct vision of the object. There is no effort to reach beyond, to an infinite and unattainable empyrean, and lose oneself in it, no ulterior aim, no impossible attempt to fuse antagonistic worlds – music and literature, the personal and the public, concrete reality and a transcendent myth. Verdi never seeks to close a breach, to compensate for the imperfections of human life, or heal his own wounds or overcome his society's inner cracks, its alienation from a common culture or from the ancient faith, by using magical means, by conjuring up an infernal, or a celestial vision as a means of escape or revenge or salvation. This is as true of *Falstaff* as it is of *Un Giorno di Regno* or the String Quartet. Desire, said Bishop Butler, culminates in its object. Verdi belongs to this tradition, and represents its finest flowering. Verdi's art, like that of Bach, is objective, direct and in harmony with the conventions which govern it. It springs from an unbroken inner unity, a sense of belonging to its own time and society and milieu, which precludes the *nostalgie de l'infini*, the conception of art as therapy which lies at the heart of what Schiller calls *sentimentalisch*. In this sense Virgil, Propertius and Horace were *sentimentalisch*: 'sentimental' and also models of classicism; while the *Song of the Niebelungs* or *Don Quixote*, idealised by the romantics, are *naiv*.

Verdi was the last of the great naïve masters of western music, in

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an age given over to the *Sentimentalishes*. He remained scarcely affected by it. He may have been interested in, or even influenced by, Wagner, or Liszt, or Meyerbeer; but the influence was confined to method, technical innovations. Their worlds and their doctrines remained alien to him. After him *naïveté* is to be found, in the west at any rate, only in the borderlands, outside the central movement – among the composers of the Slav countries, Spain, perhaps Norway, where social conditions resemble an earlier Europe.

Verdi is, of course, not without an ideology. But it is that of vast numbers of mankind across large stretches of history: this is, indeed, one of the central meanings of the term 'humanism'. Alberto Moravia traces it to his peasant origin and upbringing, which triumphed over the bourgeois society of his time. Peasants are an ancient and universal social class, and if it is this that worked in Verdi, it is not irrelevant to what Rousseau and Schiller meant by relatively uncorrupted relationship with nature.

The attacks on Verdi are notorious. They came from many quarters. In England, Mr Chorley found him too noisy, that is, too vulgar, compared to Rossini, Boieldieu etc. Nor was the wish to return to Rossini and Bellini confined to the conservatives of the north – it came from Italians too; least of all, let it be noted, from Rossini himself. Naturally the principal onslaught came from the champions of the new music: the Wagnerians and the Lisztians, the protagonists of all that was most self-conscious, extra-musical, 'sentimental', from faith in music as a messianic rebirth of the spirit. Boito, who was later to denounce Wagner as a false prophet, was in his day deeply caught by this. His explosion against Verdi is too well known to cite.

This is as it should be. Verdi was indeed the greatest, most triumphant obstacle to the new aesthetic religion: it was not worth wasting powder and shot on Pacini or Mercadante, even on Meyerbeer, Auber or Halévy, while Verdi was dominant: he was the arch-enemy, the traditionalist of power and genius. Still more violent were the attacks from the east: delivered by the great new national school of the Slav world, in particular the Russians. Balakirev and Borodin, Mussorgsky and Stassov, detested Verdi: not for his occasional platitudes and vulgarities – not for *Questa o Quella* or *O tu Palermo* – but for the very qualities in which his strength resided, his acceptance of, and his identification with, the hateful *formula* – the conventions of opera. The Russians, inspired by populist ideals, disciples of the unknown master Dargomyzhsky (whom they regarded as a genius of

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the first order), believed in musical realism, in the most intimate interrelation of words, plot, expression, music, historical and social consciousness. They virtually invented the expressive semi-recitative to convey the finest psychological nuances of the 'real' inner and outer life of both individuals and masses. When Busoni declared that love scenes should not occur on the stage – because what is intimate should not take place in public – this most sophisticated man echoed, however unconsciously (he would have been horrified to be told this), this literal realism. The Russians were in open revolt against the Italian opera of Paisiello, Cherubini, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini. At long last the miserable crew of operatic purveyors showed signs of going under; but Verdi had breathed new life into the tradition and reconquered the musical public for the beastly *formula*, the mechanical succession of detachable operatic 'numbers', the bits and pieces which could be performed in any order, from, for example, the *Requiem*, with which Verdi and his singers toured Europe. They denounced all those self-contained arias, duets, trios, quintets, choruses, the inevitable appoggiaturas and artificially stuck-on cabalettas and cavatinas, the mechanism of the all too predictable orchestral accompaniment, the terrible hurdy-gurdy that killed the living expression of real experience. *Prince Igor* seemed to them spontaneous and 'real', whereas *Don Carlo* and *La Traviata* were Christmas trees decked out with meretricious baubles. Not that they liked Wagner any better – he seemed to them one of the 'pompous disseminators of clamorous confusion',<sup>1</sup> to use Boito's phrase. Serov, their colleague who admired and imitated this master, was duly drummed out of the nationalist regiment. Their gods were Liszt and Berlioz. The greatest enemy was always Verdi, upon whom they looked as the early German romantics looked on the French arbiters of taste in the eighteenth century: shallow, pompous, stilted, artificial, utterly predictable, utterly worthless. Liszt and Berlioz were Rousseau – the return to the colours and sounds of nature, to real individual feeling from the corrupt, commercialised sophistication of the standardised authors, Marivaux, Crébillon, Marmontel, above all Voltaire, the dancing masters, with their powdered wigs and rhymed couplets and carefully contrived epigrams amid the bric-à-brac of the trivial and heartless *salons*.

This (as in the case of the Germans and the French a century earlier) was the attack of the *Sentimentalisch* on the *Naiv*: equally

<sup>1</sup> Arrigo Boito, 'Mendelssohn in Italia', *Tutti gli scritti*, ed. Piero Nardi (Verona, 1942), p. 1256.

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inevitable, perhaps, and equally exaggerated and wrongheaded. Verdi went his way, wounded, but ultimately serene and unperturbed. Doubtless, he did not belong to the new world of Baudelaire, Flaubert, Liszt, Wagner, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Mussorgsky. There is no reason to think that he was aware of this, or would have cared if he had been. He was the last great voice of humanism not at war with itself, at any rate in music.

No matter how sophisticated his scores, there is no trace, right to the end, of self-consciousness, neurosis, decadence. For that, in Italian music, we must wait for Boito, Puccini and their followers. He was the last master to paint with positive, clear, primary colours, to give direct expression to the eternal, major human emotions: love and hate, jealousy and fear, indignation and passion; grief, fury, mockery, cruelty, irony, fanaticism, faith, the passions that all men know. After him, this is much more rare. From Debussy onwards, whether music is impressionist or expressionist, neo-classical or neo-romantic, diatonic or chromatic, dodecaphonic, aleatoric or concrete, or a syncretism of these, innocence is gone.<sup>1</sup>

To escape from the inflation and the appalling elephantiasis of late German romanticism, a variety of astringent, deflationary styles came into being. But the return to Bach or to Pergolesi, or to Gesualdo, or to Machaut, is a conscious attempt to look for antidotes. This has indeed generated much original and fascinating music, anti-*sentimentalisch*, and thereby itself *sentimentalisch*, inasmuch as it is self-regarding, self-conscious, doctrine-influenced music, accompanied by theories and manifestos, neo-Catholic (Solesmes), atonal, surrealist, socialist-realist (neo-diatonic) etc. to justify it. We expect ideological declarations, programmatic statements, anathemas from Wagner or Berlioz or Debussy or the Russian composers in the twentieth century. But just as we should have regarded a manifesto on the function of literature signed by Dickens or Dumas *père* as almost inconceivable, so a *profession de foi* by Verdi on the aesthetic or social significance of Italian opera or its relation to the *commedia dell'arte* (of the kind to be

<sup>1</sup> There is a sense in which, for instance, Bruckner can be called naïve. But that is the ordinary, not Schiller's, sense. In Schiller's sense of the word, Bruckner's visionary mysticism, the combination of sensuousness and effort at self-transcendence (as in the even acuter case of César Franck and the Schola Cantorum), is the deepest imaginable *Sentimentalität*. So is the very notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, with its striving for an unattainable integration of all the elements.

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found in the writings of, say, Boito or Busoni) would rightly be suspected of being an exceptionally unpalatable forgery. Manifestos are a symptom of revolt or reaction, personal or collective; that is to say, of an acute phase of 'sentimentality'. The remoteness of Verdi, who is so often and, in a sense, so justly described as one of the most deeply characteristic and representative artists of the nineteenth century, from this particular condition, which is usually held to be a central feature of that period – its typical *malaise* – is, perhaps, what is most arresting in his personality, both as an artist and as a man. In this respect he has no successors. In music at least, he is the last naïve artist of genius. The desire to 'go back' to Verdi himself becomes a form of incurable nostalgia, of acutely non-Verdian 'sentimentality', from which he was himself wholly and peacefully free.

It is natural enough that what during the high tide of the *sentimentalisch* movement, from, say, the 1870s to the 1930s, was looked upon both by the German and the anti-German (i.e. Franco-Russian) musical public (and its critics) as Verdi's popular, vulgar style, should have re-emerged during the last quarter-century, as the last direct voice of the great tradition. It is felt to be so in conscious contrast with the quest for the remote and the exotic – symptoms of recession, the desire to obtain comfort or derive new life from traditions remote in space and time – the music of the Middle Ages or of the Age of Reason, or the relics of the folk tradition in eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and the islands of the Pacific.

Noble, simple, with a degree of unbroken vitality and vast natural power of creation and organisation, Verdi is the voice of a world which is no more. His enormous popularity among the most sophisticated as well as the most ordinary listeners today is due to the fact that he expressed permanent states of consciousness in the most direct terms: as Homer, Shakespeare, Ibsen and Tolstoy have done. This is what Schiller called *naiv*. After Verdi this is not heard in music again. Verdi's assured place, in the high canon of the musical art, which nobody now disputes, is a symptom of sanity in our time. The sociology of this phenomenon, like that of Verdi's own position in his own time, is itself a fascinating topic, but not one with which I am qualified to deal.