

# Giuseppe Verdi's *Attila*

Philip Gossett

In May of 1830 two young Russian musicians appeared in Milan: they were the composer Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka and the twenty-year-old tenor Nicolai Ivanov. They soon developed connections to musicians throughout the city (including the composers Bellini and Donizetti and the publisher Ricordi); later they traveled south, to Rome and ultimately Naples. By 1833, however, Glinka felt that he had absorbed what Italy could offer and left the country, first for a season of instruction in counterpoint with Siegfried Dehn in Berlin, then for his homeland and his future role as the father of Russian opera.

Ivanov, on the other hand, remained. Italianizing his name as Nicola Ivanoff, he made his debut at the Teatro San Carlo of Naples on July 6, 1832, as Percy in Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, part of a cast that included Giuseppina Ronzi De Begnis as Anna and Luigi Lablache as Enrico. Ivanoff may well have returned to Milan later that summer, but by the end of the year he was back in Naples, where he participated in performances of operas by Pacini and Bellini (alternating with Giovanni David as Elvino in *La sonnambula*). Most important, it was Ivanoff who sang the role of Arnaldo in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* when it had its first Neapolitan performances, beginning on April 7, 1833.<sup>1</sup>

It is not certain when Gioachino Rossini first met Ivanoff, but it was perhaps later in 1833, when the tenor took the part of Giannetto in a performance of *La gazza ladra* at the Théâtre Italien of Paris. During the next few years he sang frequently in Paris and London. He portrayed the Gondoliere in the premiere of Donizetti's *Marino Falliero* at the Théâtre Italien (March 12, 1835). Indeed, along with Labalache and the great tenor Giovanni Rubini, he was one of the soloists in the funeral service for Bellini on October 2, 1835, at Les Invalides. Rossini remained in Paris until November 1836, when, with his pension from the French government finally assured, he returned to Bologna.

By the time Ivanoff made his way back to Italy in 1840, there was already a very close, even quasipaternal relationship between Rossini and the singer.<sup>2</sup> One of the principal ways Rossini favored his protégé was by inviting composers to prepare new music for Ivanoff to insert into revivals of their operas. There is already



evidence for such activity early in 1840, when Ivanoff sang as "primo tenore" at the Teatro alla Pergola of Florence. He took part in performances of Mercadante's *I due illustri rivali* (March 20, 1840), and for that occasion Rossini obtained from Mercadante a new cabaletta for Ivanoff, which Rossini sent to the singer with a letter of March 3, 1840.<sup>3</sup> Rossini also arranged for Ivanoff to take the role of Arnaldo when *Guillaume Tell* was given first in Bologna on October 3, 1840, as *Rodolfo di Sterlinga*, and it was to Ivanoff that Rossini turned when the first Italian performance of his *Stabat Mater* took place in the same city, directed by Donizetti, on March 18, 1842.

Mercadante was not the only composer Rossini approached on behalf of Ivanoff. In 1844 the Russian tenor was scheduled to sing the title role in Verdi's *Ernani* to open the forthcoming carnival season at the Teatro Ducale of Parma. On that occasion (December 26, 1844) he unveiled a major aria for Ernani, with chorus, "Odi il voto, o grande Iddio," replacing the original duet finale of the second act. The new composition was prepared for Ivanoff by Verdi himself, at Rossini's instigation. In a letter of November 28, 1844, Rossini sent Verdi the poetry for this new scene, which he had commissioned from Francesco Maria Piave, the original librettist of *Ernani*, adding:<sup>4</sup>

In accordance with our agreement I enclose the poetry Piave has written for *Ernani*. You are so talented that I am sure you can adorn it with beautiful music and thus make my good Ivanoff happy ... My dear Verdi, please steal a few minutes from *Giovanna* to bring joy to Ivanoff.

Verdi went to work and apparently completed the commission in about a week's time.

Ivanoff actually sought the composer's advice about performing the aria, paying him a visit early in December in Milan, where Verdi was engaged in preparing his *Giovanna d'Arco* (which was to have its premiere at the Teatro alla Scala on February 15, 1845). The public success of the new aria was everything Ivanoff had hoped, and on December 26, 1844, Rossini wrote to thank Verdi and to pay him for his labors:<sup>5</sup>

I was unable to write you before today to thank you enormously for what you have done for my friend Ivanoff. He is delighted to possess the beautiful piece by you that obtained for him such a brilliant success in Parma.

I enclose here a check for 1,500 Austrian lire, which you should consider not a payment for your piece, which deserves so much more, but rather a simple token of Ivanoff's gratitude. I am very much obliged to you, whom I esteem and love.

This aria is, in fact, one of the most elaborate of the so-called "nondefinitive revisions" in the early operas of Verdi.<sup>6</sup>

It was not the last time Rossini turned to Verdi on behalf of Ivanoff. Verdi's *Attila* had its first performance at the Teatro La Fenice of Venice on March 17, 1846. When Ivanoff contracted to sing the tenor role of Foresto in a performance of the work in Trieste during the autumn of that same year, Rossini wrote from Bologna to his younger colleague on July 21, 1846, again begging a favor for his friend, who carried the letter directly to Verdi:<sup>7</sup>

Just as the enamored touch of the first kiss of his lovely hand calls for a second, so Ivanoff, bearer of this letter, remembering the first precious embrace you gave him by composing for him a magnificent aria, which brought him such honor, has come to ask you for a second embrace, that is, a second piece, which will certainly bring him supreme gratification. I was the mediator for the first meeting, and I am pleased to be so now. I beg you to accede to the wishes of my good friend, who merits all your compliance, just as I too, for the love and esteem I bear you, merit something. To work, then, my illustrious colleague, and gain new rights to the gratitude of Rossini.

By this time, Verdi was losing patience with requests of this kind. It would not be long before he refused them altogether as a matter of course. But he did not yet feel that he could refuse Rossini, and so Verdi, in turn, penned this wonderful note from Milan to his librettist Francesco Maria Piave on August 10:<sup>8</sup>

I need a favor: a Romanza with recitative and two quatrains; the subject will be a lover who is moaning about the infidelity of his beloved (old hat!). Write me 5 or 6 lines of recitative, then two quatrains of *ottonari*; there should be a masculine ending every other line, because it's easier set that way...

Make sure they're pathetic and tearful: have that imbecile of a lover say that he would give up his share of paradise and that she rewarded him with... Horns... Long live those with horns: bless them!... If I could, I'd like to give them out myself all the time!

By early September Ivanoff had his Romanza, and the opera was a great success when performed in Trieste that autumn.<sup>9</sup>

Ivanoff sang the Romanza several times. The last documented occasion was at the Teatro Regio of Turin in 1849, for which the text, "Sventurato! alla mia vita / Sol conforto era l'amor," actually appears in the printed libretto.<sup>10</sup> No edition of the music was ever printed, however, and after 1849 all contemporary references to this piece cease.

Not until the 1960s did the autograph manuscript of Verdi's Romanza resurface. At that time it was in the hands of the London manuscript dealer Albi Rosenthal, who was unwilling either to discuss its provenance or to make it available to scholars. He, in turn, sold the manuscript to Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer, from whose collection it has now passed to the Library of Congress. The "lost" Romanza for Ivanoff has finally reappeared, and its reappearance is a major gain for Verdi scholars and Verdi performers.

The manuscript consists of a fascicle of four bifolios in upright format (24 cm. by 32 cm.), notated on folios 1 through 8r (folio 8v is blank). At the top of the first page Verdi entitled the piece "Romanza," and in the right margin he signed and dated the manuscript: "G. Verdi. Milano 15 Novembre 1845 [sic]. Di proprietà da Sig. Nicola Ivanoff." The dating of this dedication is peculiar. It could not have been written during the composition of the Romanza, which was completed between the end of August and the beginning of September 1846. More likely, Verdi did not originally write a dedication on the Romanza;<sup>11</sup> Ivanoff, returning to Milan after the conclusion of the Trieste season, must have asked the composer to add one on

November 15, 1846. The "1845" indication, which seems quite clear in the autograph, was surely a slip of the pen.

The Romanza begins with a short scena that picks up in measure 35 of the original scena for Foresto at the opening of Act III of *Attila*. (The first chord in this manuscript, a D-Major chord in first inversion, is identical with the parallel chord in the original scena.) Foresto's text, which is slightly different from the text printed in the Turin libretto, reads as follows:<sup>12</sup>

Infida!...  
Fatta certezza è il dubbio...  
I giuri suoi smentiva!... oh tradimento!  
Straziata dal dolor l'alma mi sento!...  
Sventurato! alla mia vita  
Sol conforto era l'amor!  
Sventurato! or disparita  
Ogni gioia è dal mio cor!  
Ah!.. perché le diede il cielo  
Tanto fiore di beltà;  
Se ad un cor dovea far velo  
Nido reo d'infedeltà.

Piave's verses follow Verdi's request with precision, both in terms of their structure (two quatrains of *ottonari*, with a masculine ending every other line) and their poetic content ("pathetic and tearful: have that imbecile of a lover say that he would have given up his share of paradise and that she rewarded him with... Horns").

The layout of the score and orchestration is typical of Verdi's work in the mid-1840s and is perfectly consistent with the remainder of *Attila*. On the twenty-stave paper the lowest three staves are occupied by "Canto" (i.e., Foresto), cellos, and double basses. The upper three staves are reserved for the violins and violas, followed by one flute, one piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets in B-flat, two pairs of horns, two trumpets, two bassoons, three trombones, cimbasso and timpani.<sup>13</sup> While the scena at the beginning of the Romanza are scored for strings, the entire orchestra gradually joins the texture as the music approaches its climax, then leaves the strings alone as the sound dies away ("morendo") at the conclusion.

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Foresta' from Verdi's opera 'Il Trovatore'. The score is in 3/4 time, A-flat minor, and features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line includes the lyrics 'Sven - tu - ra - ro!' and 'al - ba - nia - vi - ra'. The piano accompaniment includes triplets and a ppp dynamic marking.

The masterful Romanza, an Andante in triple meter, begins in A-flat Minor with a beautiful legato phrase over a simple staccato and pizzicato accompaniment in the strings. As the first quatrain concludes, Verdi brings the music to the relative major, then addresses the tonic again, now in major, as Foresto begins the second quatrain.

The line continues to swell as the voice ascends to a high B flat before descending for the conclusion of the phrase. Verdi repeats this phrase, but he reorchestrates it (introducing, in particular, a pizzicato figure for the cellos) and syncopates the ascent to B flat. The voice concludes, fortissimo, on the high A flat, but the note must be held for three measures, "diminuendo" and then "morendo," while the orchestra falls away, leading to a reprise of the opening string figuration, with "morendo" chords in the first horn and bassoons. It is a lovely effect, and daunting to any but a first-rate singer.

Ivanoff must have been delighted.

*Foresto*

*legato*

Ah per - che le die - deil cie - lo can - to

fi - re di bel - la, di bel - la;

<sup>1</sup> The spring season of 1833 in Naples also featured singers such as Maria Malibran, Domenico Reina, and Luigi Lablache.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Felice Romani of December 3, 1846, Rossini wrote: "Dearest friend: Ivanoff, whom I love like a son, will be the bearer of this letter." See *Lettere di G. Rossini, raccolte e annotate*, ed. G. Mazzatinti and F. and G. Manis (Florence, 1902), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> *Lettere di G. Rossini*, pp. 96-97. The cabaletta was probably written for a duet, as we learn from Rossini's letter, which begins: "Dearest friend: With this same post you will find the cabaletta I received from Mercadante, which seems to me very sentimental; if the duet does not feel too long it would even be possible to repeat it." Rossini apparently also asked Mercadante to reorchestrate a romanza: see his letter to Mercadante of March 16, 1840, *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> For further information about this commission, see the introduction to *Ernani*, ed. Claudio Gallico, in *The Works of Giuseppe Verdi*, ser. I, vol. 5 (Chicago and Milan, 1985), p. xxii. The original letter is in *Carteggi verdiani*, 4 vols, ed. Alessandro Luzio (Rome, 1935-47), vol. IV, pp. 32-33. The translation is from Gallico.

<sup>5</sup> *Carteggi verdiani*, vol. II, p. 346. The translation is from Gallico, *op. cit.*, p. xxii. The autograph of the new Aria is preserved in the Mary Flagler Cary Music Collection at the

Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

<sup>6</sup> See David Lawton and David Rosen, "Verdi's Non-definitive Revisions: The Early Operas," in *Atti del III° congresso internazionale di studi verdiani (Milano, Piccola Scala, 12-17 giugno 1972)* (Parma, 1974), pp. 189-237.

<sup>7</sup> *Carteggi verdiani*, vol. IV, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> The original text is printed in Lawton and Rosen, op. cit., pp. 236-37. This translation is based on theirs (see pp. 206-7).

<sup>9</sup> Emanuele Muzio, Verdi's student, in a letter of September 10, 1846, to the composer's father-in-law, Antonio Barezzi, reports: "*Attila* is being given in Trieste; I don't know whether you are aware that the Maestro, at the behest of Rossini, has prepared an aria for Ivanoff to insert into *Attila*. If you don't know, I'm informing you, and the aria has already been written and sent to Bologna, and perhaps within the week Rossini will send a payment." *Giuseppe Verdi nelle lettere di Emanuele Muzio ad Antonio Barezzi*, ed. Luigi Agostino Garibaldi (Milan, 1931), p. 269.

<sup>10</sup> The text of the new Romanza does not appear in the libretto printed for the Trieste performances. See Lawton and Rosen, op. cit., p. 207; the libretto text from Turin is reproduced on p. 234.

<sup>11</sup> Or, more important, had not granted "proprietà" to Ivanoff, that is, exclusive rights to the Romanza. This exclusivity meant that Ivanoff alone had the right to sing the piece or use it as he saw fit.

<sup>12</sup> Punctuation, which is lacking for the most part in Verdi's autograph, has been integrated where necessary from the Turin libretto (see Lawton and Rosen, op. cit., p. 234). The most important differences in the text between the printed libretto and the autograph are the following: 1) the words "I giuri suoi smentiva!" are not included in the Turin libretto; 2) the phrase "Nido reo" used by Verdi as the last verse becomes "Alma rea" in the Turin libretto.

<sup>13</sup> Verdi specifies the tuning of the pairs of horns (in E-flat and A-flat), the trumpets (in E-flat), and timpani (in A-flat) on folio 2v, at the beginning of the Romanza proper.