

27: Verdi, his Operas & Parma

N. L. (October 13, 2013)



The international conference Verdi's Third Century: Italian Opera Today, a collaboration between the American Institute for Verdi Studies and New York University, has brought together scholars, practitioners, and critics at NYU to discuss the circulation and perception of Verdi in today's world. It all started with 27, a documentary in progress on Verdi and his influence on Parma.

Many different institutions have celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). Today, the interest in his operas remains undiminished and his music continues to travel around the world in live performances and recordings. The international conference Verdi's Third Century: Italian Opera Today (October 9 -13), a collaboration between the American Institute for Verdi Studies and New York University, has brought together scholars, practitioners, and critics at New York University to discuss the circulation and perception of Verdi and of Italian opera-in today's



world.

Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò opened the dances with a presentation of *27 A Documentary Filmin Progress* by August Ventura. 27 are the works of Giuseppe Verdi. 27 are the members of the men-only Club of 27 in Parma. 27 are the red roses they bring to the composer's birthplace every October 10th. (After placing them, they all sing *Va Pensiero*)

"When I was a young boy of 18," Stefano Albertini, the director of Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò recalled, "I attended the University of Parma. In my eyes, the city was obsessed with opera, even sandwiches were named after operas. And Verdi is basically considered the patron saint of the city. I heard about the 27, I just thought they were some weird old men and what they actually did was shrouded in mystery."

"They are guys from all walks of life, there is a pharmacist, a notary public, even a soccer celebrity, who love Verdi and love to talk about Verdi," August Ventura, the man behind the project said. "Once they meet there are no names, no titles, they all are equal. So how do they call each other? By the titles of Verdi's Operas. So there is a Mr Rigoletto, a Don Carlos, a I Lombardi and so forth."

Just like in Harry Potter, where little wizards are assigned to one of the four school Houses by the Sorting Hat, it is fate that decides who becomes what. In a fragment of the documentary we witnessed an energetic interview of Alberto Michelotti, who now goes by Don Carlos, but when he joined, in 1973, he was really afraid, for a minute, that fate would assign him to *Messa da Requiem*, the other available name. "I was ecstatic because Don Carlos really represents me," Michelotti, who had issues with his father, is captured saying, "it really gets under my skin, it speaks to me like nothing else." The interview itself was a small masterpiece, Michelotti's passion could be felt by all. He talked about his job as a referee as that of a conductor where the soccer players automatically became the characters of the opera that was playing in his head. "Don Carlo," that's how they even started to call him on the field. The ones who knew him for years knew they were part this magnificent opera.

But 27 is not only about the members of the club. "It is about the unique opera culture that exists in Parma and its strong connection to the work of Giuseppe Verdi," August Ventura explained. "At a time when Italy's opera culture is in apparent decline, this small city maintains a fierce connection to the art form, but above all to the 27 works of Giuseppe Verdi, who was born nearby, 200 years ago. Parma's legendary 'loggionisti' (who can stop a performance cold with their shouts of disapproval) and the super-exclusive, men-only Club of 27 are just two expressions of this uniquely vibrant opera culture."

In other fragments of the documentary the audience was introduced to a lost film titled *In the Mouth of the Wolf* about the staging of *Luisa Miller*, to the *Verdissime*, the female counterpart of the Club of 27, where each member is named after a female character of Verdi's opera, and to high school children who lip synch to *Nabucco* with as much enthusiasm as participating to a hip and fun concert.

A local is captured by Ventura's camera saying "Verdi ci da il pane," meaning "Verdi provides for all of us." Many are the people in the city who are able to capitalize on his name thus he is, for an additional reason, a real hero, a true citizen who still helps, 200 years later, his fellow citizens.

27 is still a work in progress. It is an independently-produced feature-length documentary, 80+ minutes long. Over 100 hours of footage was shot over two consecutive Octobers (2011 and 2012) in and around Parma during its Festival Verdi. 27 is fiscally sponsored by Fractured Atlas whose 501(c)3 designation makes it eligible to receive tax-deductible donations that will help with the completion of the film.

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