

# STUDI VERDIANI

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PARMA, 2019-2020



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## VIDEO

### «Monarch of all we survey»: *Stiffelio* on DVD from Parma

Roger Parker

GIUSEPPE VERDI, *Stiffelio* (Festival Verdi - Teatro Regio di Parma, 2017), Naxos, DVD 2.110590, 2019.

Practicalities first. Graham Vick's production of *Stiffelio* created something of a *furore* when first seen in Parma in the autumn of 2017, and subsequently won a special prize at the 2018 "Franco Abbiati" critics' awards. It took place in the Teatro Farnese, an early seventeenth-century wooden structure which cannot comfortably house the orchestral space, stage and auditorium that nineteenth-century opera demands. So Vick made a virtue out of necessity by using the theatre's central space to accommodate both the action and the audience. The former played out on mobile platforms that could be combined for the larger scenes and were often fashioned into symbolic shapes. The latter, with no seating, roamed among the platforms, sometimes mingling there with the chorus, often consulting their mobile phones to access a company-sponsored libretto-app. In this sense, the defamiliarisation attempted by Vick's directorial reading of the plot – its updating of the action to something close to the present day, of which more anon – was as nothing compared to the far more radical re-situating of the

entire operatic experience, the banishing of those centuries-old divisions between the world of the stage and that of the auditorium.

Readers of «Studi verdiani» might immediately be reminded of one of Verdi's most celebrated letters, addressed to Giulio Ricordi but reading – as do so many of his later letters – more like a public manifesto than a personal confidence. The composer is talking about performance conditions for his new opera, *Aida*, and recommends that those responsible concern themselves with two reforms:

to get rid of the stage boxes, taking the curtain right to the footlights; and also to make the *orchestra invisible*. The idea isn't mine, it's Wagner's: and it's excellent. It seems impossible that in this day and age people tolerate seeing tired evening dress and white ties mixed up with, for example, Egyptian, Assyrian or Druidic costumes; and, what is more, seeing the massed ranks of the orchestra, *which is part of the fictional world*, almost in the middle of the stalls, amongst the whistlers or the applauders.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, Vick's conception was, at least in part, in frank opposition to what Verdi seemed to advocate, with Richard Wagner as his unlikely model: Vick wanted to bring messy, quotidian life right up close with Verdian musical drama; he wanted the audience to feel as if they and the singing actors were part of the same project. On the other hand, though, what *was* on the Verdi/Wagner axis of this letter, and the obvious casualty in Vick's all-embracing conception, was the orchestra, hidden from the action in a corner of the theatre. The extreme proximity of the voices *vs* the displaced and hidden orchestra must – Bayreuth-like – have posed severe challenges in live performance. The problems were partly solved by a battery of TV monitors displaying the conductor.

In a brief video *presentazione*, still available on YouTube, Vick confides that his production is intended to strike a blow against the «swing to the right» he finds evident across Europe, and hopes that it will lure to the Parma Festival «a new public, including young people».<sup>2</sup> So much, so newly pious, one might think. Given Vick's orientation, it is hardly a surprise that the eponymous hero of his *Stiffelio* is at best an

<sup>1</sup> «[T]ogliere dal palcoscenico i palchetti degli spettatori, portando il sipario alla ribalta, l'altra [innovazione]: di rendere l'*orchestra invisibile*. Quest'idea non è mia, è di Wagner: è buonissima. – Pare impossibile che al giorno d'oggi si tolleri di vedere il nostro meschino *frack* e le cravattine bianche, miste per es. ad un costume egizio, assiro, druidico etc. etc....; e di vedere, inoltre, la massa d'orchestra, *che è parte del mondo fittizio*, quasi nel mezzo della platea fra il mondo dei fischianti o dei plaudenti». Letter from Sant'Agata, dated 10 July 1871, in *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, edited by Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio, Milano, Commissione esecutiva per le onoranze a Giuseppe Verdi nel primo centenario della nascita, 1913, pp. 263-265: 265.

<sup>2</sup> <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61mj\\_aYq\\_1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61mj_aYq_1s)>. I have translated Vick's Italian.

ambiguous figure, at worst an entirely negative force in the action. His “church” is one inhabited by enforcers: violently anti-gay (they savagely beat up a “suspect” as a curtain-raiser to Act 2) and anti-women’s rights; a distinctly evangelical collective. The upper part of the theatre is decorated by inflammatory political posters, and the dramatic message is throughout delivered via vivid symbolism. In one “signature” moment near the end of Act 2, Stiffelio in a murderous rage pins hapless lover Raffaele to, of all things, a giant crucifix, thus reversing the roles completely (and offering the generally odious Raffaele an unexpected and undeserved saintliness). In a later scene, tortured Stankar passionately embraces one of his daughter Lina’s dolls while singing an aria, then violently twists off its head, then – just in case we’ve missed the point – strokes the decapitated head lovingly. As expected in this context, the one character who might command unequivocal sympathy is Lina: but she is doubly or triply infantilized (her dolls, her cot-like bed with its stickers and other juvenilia) as well as indulging, not entirely reluctantly, in some of the most explicit opera-video-sex to have come my way in quite a time.

\* \* \*

And now a confession. Alas, I wasn’t present at Parma’s Festival in 2017 and so I have no direct experience of how (and especially, by my lights, whether) Graham Vick’s imagining of *Stiffelio* at the Teatro Farnese worked theatrically. By most accounts, though, it was revelatory. My task here is to review the video, and, at risk of stating the obvious, a video can never be a simple record of an event. The extent of the credits as the Overture reels past (with the audience shown entering the theatre) is enough to remind us of the sheer complexity of modern opera production, but to my mind it is fitting that this video version has as its last name not Graham Vick but Daniele de Plano, named “video director” and thus in charge of the camera through which we view the event. To repeat, then, what you are reading here is not, cannot be, a review of Graham Vick’s production of *Stiffelio*; it is of a video re-imagining/recreation of that event, now no longer recoverable. The vogue word for the cultural work such a video does is “remediation”, and the term is useful if it reminds us of the complex technological transfers that are involved.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>I am, of course, by no means the first person to make this point, and have indeed discussed the issue previously in print: see my *Giuseppe Verdi “Don Carlo(s)”: “Live” on DVD*, in «The Opera Quarterly», XXVI/4 (2010), pp. 603-614, reprinted in «Verdi Forum», 37-38 (2010-2011 [pub. 2014]), pp. 71-79; and *Stefan Herheim’s “La bohème” on DVD: A Review Portfolio*, in «The Opera Quarterly», XXIX/2 (2013), pp. 156-61 (written jointly with Flora Willson). For further insights, see in particular EMANUELE SENICI, *Porn Style? Space and Time in Live Opera*, in «The Opera Quarterly», XXVI/1 (2010), pp. 63-80.

I labour this point because, although film scholars and others have theorised this process of mediation, sometimes elaborately, it is nevertheless the default attitude of reviewers, even reviewers in scholarly journals, to assume that to write about a video is, unproblematically, a second, conveniently home-based chance to write about – and from the proverbial best-seat-in-the-house – a production and even a *performance*. It is of course nothing of the kind (or, at least, little of the kind). To mention two very obvious points: our video-trained eyes cannot stray freely, our points of vision and focus being constantly dictated by the camera's eye; and – of great significance in terms of opera videos – the sound we receive is confected, with our perceptions of distance and volume either injected artificially or erased completely. Perhaps even more important, though – and especially so for this production – we typically view a DVD in isolation, most often these days through our “personal computer”; the performance can thus be consumed entirely at our whim. The eighteenth-century poet William Cooper, famously ventriloquising Alexander Selkirk (real-life castaway and prototype of Robinson Crusoe), penned a good opening stanza on the pleasures and pains of such autonomy:

I am monarch of all I survey,  
My right there is none to dispute,  
From the centre all round to the sea,  
I am lord of the fowl and the brute.  
O solitude! Where are the charms  
That sages have seen in thy face?  
Better dwell in the midst of alarms,  
Than reign in this horrible place.

Yes indeed: that rhythmic jolt at the start of the second quatrain marks a wake-up call. Being monarch sounds excellent; but only until we consider the isolation it brings. However, consuming Vick's spectacle via video might risk more, perhaps even unsettling the very *raison d'être* of the production. When we spin Daniele de Plano's DVD, after all, we cannot be *among* the spectators: indeed, the spectators are part of the “fowl and the brute”, they are literally part of the performance, there for our visual pleasure.

Some might retort that I am being absurdly literal, wilfully pedantic, about such problems. After all, the formulations in the last paragraph ignore our extreme sophistication in the decoding of narrative visual images, the complex acts of identification we can thereby enact and enjoy. Virtuoso viewers that we are, we can – the argument goes – be at one with the audience *and* with the characters *and* with the performers *and* even with the work itself, moving freely between points of view as the mood takes us, untrammelled by the restrictions of the medium. Perhaps this is

to some degree the case, and is an ability assumed and then manipulated by many a video director. Certainly a knowingness about the modern-day proliferation of visual images seems to be a prominent feature of de Plano's (and, before that, Graham Vick's) conception of the drama. The extent to which the camera, and screens more generally, are an integral part of the performance, is striking. Wandering cameramen were evidently a feature of the production, often seen on screen and plainly generating a rich proliferation of points of view around the theatre. What is more, the audience's consumption of the semantic complexities of the libretto (and, for those who needed it, its translation) via a mobile app, means that they often seem to be absorbed by their personal screens at moments of change and high tension (after *surtitles* and *supertitles* and *in-the-back-of-the-seat-in-front-titles*, we need yet another term for this form of delivery: perhaps *medititles*?). Nor was the musical means of production spared explicit screen mediation: as mentioned, the orchestra and its conductor are for the most part banished from the visual display, but again as mentioned earlier – and for obvious reasons of co-ordination – there are a battery of TV screens around the theatre broadcasting the conductor's beat, with the result that in the background of many shots we see a ghostly gesticulating presence calling the hidden musical forces to order.

All this proliferation of screens might, as I said, encourage a knowing acceptance and appreciation of the inevitable differences between a screen-consumed and theatre-experienced entertainment; but we need to bear in mind that the video of an opera has another, equally powerful signifying system to accommodate, that of sound; and here the situation is more complex and – at least for this listener – more disconcerting. I mentioned a moment ago the musical means of production, part of which (the orchestra) was relegated to an unseen, proto-Wagnerian region.<sup>4</sup> That was a loss, but one that, at the least, modern theatrical architecture has encouraged. It was also the case, though, that the multiplicity of camera angles served to draw attention to the uniformity of the recorded sound. We might, for example, visually be struck by a character suddenly appearing in the upper reaches of the theatrical space; but the *sound* of the character never bore traces of such displacement: the vocal “presence” of every character was stubbornly unchanging. What is more, those wandering cameramen ensured that the

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<sup>4</sup> The language and formulations here obviously recall certain aspects of Adorno's famous critique of Wagner. As he wrote at one point: «[t]he magical effect is inseparable from the same rational process of production that it attempts to exorcize. [...] Wagner's division of labour is that of an individual. This sets limits to it, which is perhaps why it has to be so strenuously denied». THEODOR W. ADORNO, *In Search of Wagner*, Engl. trans. by Rodney Livingstone, London, Verso, 1981, pp. 109-110; first published as *Versuch über Wagner*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 1952.

singers were the objects of many close-ups, but during such moments there was hardly a trace of these performers' means of production: of the fact that singing Verdi is hard physical work, requiring split-second co-ordination with others, sometimes not close by. Nor did I see any of the microphones that must have relayed their voices to the mixing booths. Of course we are, in this age of "live in HD", becoming adept at filtering and incorporating such aural/visual non-sequiturs, but in this case, confronted by such an unusual and challengingly new theatrical conception, the disjunctions and absences became strangely disconcerting: it even entered my mind that perhaps the singers were (at least at certain points) lip-synching and thus that the entire video (audience and all) was merely a technological sleight of hand: a simulacrum of "liveness" rather than a mediation of an event.<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

Perhaps we (by which I mean we specialists, we people who have the good fortune to consume much of our opera in live venues) worry too much about such points of origin: it would certainly make for a simpler life just to allow the video "moment" to exist in its own space and not concern ourselves overmuch with what might be called ontological scruples. What is more, this performance was evidently of a high order. Even though so much of what is communicated by operatic vocalists – the "reach" of the voice, its focus – cannot be judged on a video, and even though, these days, recorded vocal sounds can be manipulated in multiple ways, even with regards to tuning, it is nevertheless evident that the Parma performances featured some very fine singing indeed. Luciano Ganci's Stiffelio was a case in point: he managed to tread a delicate line between control and frenzy (the part, famously, needs both) and maintained a dignified presence even in the face of some fiercely negative stereotyping. Maria Katzarava as Lina was assailed by even greater challenges, but coped with great dignity with what the production threw at her (which included, as well as the strenuous opera-sex and doll-hugging infantilisation mentioned earlier, a bout of post-aria self-harming) and negotiated tellingly the demands of the role: no easy feat, as Verdi's Lina swings unpredictably between "old", cabaletta-strewn Verdi and his newer incarnation. Francesco Landofi snarled and emoted powerfully as Stankar; Emanuele Cordaro boomed as Jorg. Giovanni Sala was excellent as Raffaele, a tricky part in that this *secondo tenore* needs to be a considerable presence for the drama to be credible. Guillermo García Calvo conducted the hidden Orchestra del Teatro Comunale di Bologna with verve and imagination.

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<sup>5</sup>The back cover of the video box is, shall we say, laconic about the "liveness" element, simply saying that what we are witnessing was «filmed during the Festival Verdi, October 2017 at the Teatro Farnese».

But what of the work? *Stiffelio*'s difficulties in its first years are well documented, and of course led to the *Aroldo* revision. Abramo Basevi was lukewarm about most of the music and, perhaps predictably, disapproved of the unconventional subject matter: how can Italian audiences sympathise with a priest who is *married*? Still worse, one who is a tenor rather than a bass?<sup>6</sup> After *Aroldo* the performance history virtually halted until the discovery of orchestral materials in the Naples Conservatory and a revival in Parma in 1968, conducted by Peter Maag. Julian Budden, writing in the first volume of his *magnum opus* in 1973 was not uncritical (particularly of the plot complexities), but boldly stated in the final sentence of his chapter on the opera that «[w]ith all its imperfections *Stiffelio* is worthy to stand beside the three masterpieces which it immediately precedes».<sup>7</sup> However, in terms of modern reception the crucial moment was undoubtedly 1993. In that year, two extremely high-profile performances took place and were then released as DVD recordings. In each case the title role was taken by one of the “three tenors” franchise, then at the height of its fame: early in the year came José Carreras at the Royal Opera House in London, conducted by Edward Downes; later came Plácido Domingo at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, conducted by James Levine.<sup>8</sup> These two performances were preceded by, and benefitted from, the release from Sant'Agata of the *Stiffelio* autograph materials, materials that eventually gave rise of Kathleen Kuzmick Hansell's critical edition.<sup>9</sup> In short, a better re-launch for a neglected title could hardly be imagined; but since then revivals have remained sporadic and mostly low-profile. Will the opera, newly energised by Vick's theatrical experiment, now blossom forth, climbing up the *operabase.com* rankings and – in Budden's words – rival «the three masterpieces which it immediately precedes»? According to *operabase.com*'s statistics for the last fifteen years (2004–2019), *La traviata* has had 2123 productions, *Rigoletto* 1383 and *Il trovatore* (behind *Aida* and *Nabucco*) 705. *Stiffelio* in the meantime has clocked up 33 productions: by no means negligible, but substantially behind several other “lesser” Verdian titles such as *Giovanna d'Arco* (44) or *I masnadieri* (41).<sup>10</sup> The sheer difficulty of entering the “operatic repertory” should never be

<sup>6</sup> ABRAMO BASEVI, *Studio sulle opere di Giuseppe Verdi*, Firenze, Tofani, 1859, pp. 171–182, see in particular pp. 171–172.

<sup>7</sup> JULIAN BUDDEN, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 voll., London, Cassell, 1973–1981, I: *From “Oberto” to “Rigoletto”* (1973), p. 474.

<sup>8</sup> Carreras' DVD is available on the Opus Arte label (OAR3103D); Domingo's on Deutsche Grammophon (000871709).

<sup>9</sup> GIUSEPPE VERDI, *Stiffelio*, edited by Kathleen Kuzmick Hansell, in *The Works of / Le opere di Giuseppe Verdi*, I/16, Chicago-London - Milano, University of Chicago Press - Ricordi, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> <<https://www.operabase.com/statistics/en>>: (accessed 29 December 2019).

doubted, perhaps particularly in the relatively straitened operatic times of the last thirty years.

So *Stiffelio*, in spite of those *galáctico* performances in the 1990s, and the massy monumentality of its critical edition, and the theatrical experiments and aggressive updating of this recent revival, will probably remain among the lesser stars in the Verdian firmament. And the central reason is probably the most banal: that in spite of wonderful ensembles it lacks the popular melodies that do so much to fuel and maintain “repertory” status. This notwithstanding, and in spite of my caveats, Daniele de Plano’s video is a valuable addition to the Verdian repertory, not least because it makes us think anew about the broad concept of the operatic “production”, in particular about the manner in which opera is consumed in our screen-saturated world. A final example: in what is one of *Stiffelio*’s grandest moments, in the middle of the Act 2 finale, the protagonist is about to plunge his sword into cowering Raffaele when (according to Verdi’s musical instructions) he is halted by the sound of an offstage choir from the nearby church, raising their voices in urgent supplication: «Non punirmi, Signor, nel tuo furore». In the Parma performance, the choir were instead ranged around the upper reaches of the Teatro Farnese, making their intervention thunderously immediate. In the video’s *mise en scène*, necessarily encompassing the audience as well as the performers, the acoustic shock of this intervention not only stops *Stiffelio* in his tracks. Far more challengingly, it also shows many members of the audience, moments ago absorbed in the personal drama, turning away from the actors, instinctively seeking out the source of this booming new sound; others – we might call them the “musicologist” types – consult their apps or their programme books, wanting to make semantic sense of the moment; still others seem completely unmoved, perhaps at that moment in another place entirely, thinking of matters distant from the theatre and its fictional world. For some reason, I found this moment strangely moving. Perhaps it was because the frank display of this fragmented collective constituted a kind of honesty, of realism if you will, that is hardly ever essayed when video mediates opera. It has, after all, been a cliché of opera videos to open with the establishing shot of a chattering crowd who are then hushed by the first notes of music and never seen again, becoming submerged in what Verdi in that letter to Ricordi called the «*fictional world*». In this sense, de Plano’s *Stiffelio* tells an important alternative story. It reminds us that opera videos’ habitual erasure of the audience is itself a fiction, and a distorting one. To be reminded of such quotidian facts does not, or should not, diminish Verdian drama; indeed, it can serve to remind us – perhaps just as powerfully as Vick’s political allegories – that opera’s strange survival into the modern world can be explained in multiple ways.