Verismo: Origin, Corruption, and Redemption of an Operatic Term
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“Victor Hugo is a verist in the strictest sense of the word.”

“How the term verismo—the literary or musical one—should be defined is not certain,” concedes Hans-Joachim Wagner at the outset of his comprehensive recent study on verismo opera, conveying in a nutshell the current state of research. Twenty years earlier, in his landmark study Italian Opera in Transition, 1871–1893, Jay Nicolaisen had been similarly cautious, warning his readers of the problems surrounding the term without committing himself to any particular meaning:

[Verismo] is a term that must be handled with greater care [than in the past] if it is to be used at all, and with a rather more precise idea of the implications its use carries. Otherwise we shall continue to face the curious situation in which the musically primitive Cavalleria rusticana (1890), a one-act opera based on a violent play by Giovanni Verga, and the musically sophisticated Turandot (1924), a four-act opera based on an exotic fairy tale by the eighteenth-century Italian Carlo Gozzi, are lumped willy-nilly under the same convenient heading. . . . If Mascagni had not set Cavalleria a few years after its appearance as a play, it is questionable whether the term “verismo” would have been transferred to the operatic sphere at all.

Nicolaisen had good reason for his caution: ever since the first monographs on verismo in music (by Karl Blessinger [1922] and Mario Rinaldi [1932]), scholars had been advocating a great variety of definitions, drawing on
whatever sources bolstered their point. Without easy access to many of the nineteenth-century sources, however, neither Nicolaïsen nor his predecessors could have known that their concept of verismo was not too broad but, rather, too narrow. They saw in “verismo” a term borrowed from literary criticism and applied to opera for the first time with Cavalleria rusticana, whereas in fact the nineteenth-century critical literature on verismo shows that it emerged in 1867, in connection with the visual arts and that, as a general concept, it was already being used in connection with opera several years before the premiere of Cavalleria rusticana.

Nevertheless, “verismo” is now used almost exclusively to describe a specific type of literary realism defined by Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga, who in their theoretical works and prefaces succeeded in formulating a convincing literary aesthetic. Its general coherence with the work of Émile Zola eventually led to the establishment of the homogeneous set of characteristics presented in modern literary histories: the regional character and inherent pessimism of the stories; the blind passion of the protagonists; a quasi-scientific and detached approach to describing both the social, cultural, and political climate in which the characters function and their psychological thought processes; and the importance of a language appropriate to the social and geographical situation of the characters. In this kind of literature, the author must become intimately familiar with his characters: their customs, way of thinking, traditions, and language—an approach Verga called “scienza del cuore umano” (“science of the human heart”). Literary verismo thus focuses on the

4. Karl Blessinger, Der Verismo (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag des Bühnen-Volksbundes, 1922); and Mario Rinaldi, Musica e verismo: Critica ed estetica d‘una tendenza musicale (Rome: De Santis, 1932).

5. Regarding the literary origin of verismo, Julian Budden claims, for example: “The fact is that verismo, like many an artistic movement, was literary in origin, the term itself being the Italian equivalent of Emile Zola’s ‘naturalism’” (“Puccini, Massenet and ‘Verismo,’” Opera 34 [1983]: 477). Regarding the connection between verismo and Cavalleria rusticana, see Matteo Sansone, who states: “The . . . success [of Cavalleria rusticana] led to Cavalleria rusticana becoming the prototype of a new genre. The term verismo was adopted, to designate the subject of the libretto and the work’s musico-dramatic structure” (“Verismo,” in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 2nd ed. [2001], 26:477). See also Wagner, Fremde Welten, 2 and 51–57.

6. Luigi Capuana wrote numerous books on literary aesthetics. The most important ones are Il teatro italiano contemporaneo: Saggi critici nuovamente raccolti e riveduti dall’autore (Palermo: Luigi Pedone Lauriel, 1872); Per l’arte (Catania: Giannotta, 1885); and Gli “ismi” contemporanei (verismo, simbolismo, idealismo, cosmopolitismo) ed altri saggi di critica letteraria ed artistica (Catania: Giannotta, 1898). Giovanni Verga’s main theoretical texts appear as introductions to Eva (1873), “L’amante di Gramigna” (from Vita dei campi [1880]), and I Malavoglia (1881).


8. See Ferroni on I Malavoglia (Dall’Ottocento al Novecento, 423) and Verga’s prefaces to “L’amante di Gramigna” and I Malavoglia. Capuana even used photographs in this process; an
logical and tragic development of the protagonists’ character as a consequence of the “fateful, endless and often wearisome and agitated path trod by humanity to achieve progress,” which leaves the weak by the wayside. It is important to keep in mind that a focus on the weak is not equivalent to a focus on the lowest social classes. Characters are frequently drawn from the middle class, and although never completed, later installments of Verga’s cycle I vinti—“The Duchess of Leyra” and “The Man of Luxury”—were intended to explore aristocratic realms.

Finally, and most importantly, literary histories emphasize Capuana’s and Verga’s concept of “impersonality,” which requires that the author hide his voice in order to let the story unfold on the basis of social, economical, cultural, and psychological conditions. Unlike the narrator in Alessandro Manzoni’s I promessi sposi, for instance, who often refers to himself and overtly promotes Christian ideals, the veristic author does not interfere by referring to himself, avoids lecturing his reader on “ideals” of religion or patriotism as a way to happiness and salvation, and reinforces the impression of impersonality—i.e., authorial detachment—by frequently drawing on speech. He thus conveys to the readers the sense that they are present in the moment, listening directly to the characters themselves. The latter aspect gives the impression of a collective point of view and thus of greater reality.

Most of these characterics apply to Verga’s novel I Malavoglia (1881), the story of which is firmly rooted in the social and economic conditions of the years immediately following the proclamation in 1861 of the unified Italian kingdom. After ’Ntoni is called up for naval service, his grandfather and head of the Malavoglia family, padron ’Ntoni, decides to offset the loss of his grandson’s help on the fishing boat by entering a risky deal concerning a load of lupins (a type of agriculturally important plant). The following brief passage sets up the social and economic context:

Meanwhile it had been a bad year and fish had virtually to be given away like alms, now that Christians had learned to eat meat on Fridays like so many Turks. Furthermore there weren’t enough hands left at home to manage the boat, and at times they had to take on Menico della Locca, or someone else. Because the king’s trick was to take boys away for conscription when they were

example from Capuana’s collection, showing three representatives of the lowest social class, is re-produced in Janowski, “Ottocento,” 290.


10. See Verga’s preface to I Malavoglia.


12. See Ferroni, Storia della letteratura italiana, 408, 423, and 426. Many of the characteristics of Italian verismo mentioned in literary histories also apply to French, German, and Russian naturalism. Following the nineteenth-century Italian critics, we restrict our treatment to Italy and occasional references to France.
ready to earn their own bread; but as long as they were a drain on family resources, you had to bring them up yourself, so they could be soldiers later; and in addition to all this Mena [padron 'Ntoni's granddaughter] was nearly seventeen and was beginning to turn young men’s heads when she went to mass. “Man is fire, and woman the straw; the devil comes, and blows.” That was why the family from the house by the medlar-tree had to sweat blood to keep the boat seaworthy.

So, to keep things going, padron 'Ntoni had arranged a deal with zio [uncle] Crocifisso Dumb-bell, a deal in connection with some lupins that were to be bought on credit and resold at Riposto, where compare [neighbor] Cinghialenta had said there was a boat loading up for Trieste. Actually the lupins were not in the peak of condition; but they were the only ones in Trezza. . . .

Women have no business sense, and padron 'Ntoni had to explain to [Maruzza, his daughter-in-law] that if the deal went well they would have bread for the winter, and earrings for Mena, and Bastiano [‘Ntoni’s son] would be able to go to Riposto and back in a week. . . . That was how the lupin deal came about, and with it the voyage of the Provvidenza, which was the oldest of the village boats but which had a lucky name anyhow. Maruzza still felt black at heart, but she kept quiet, because it wasn’t her business, and she quietly went about organizing the boat and everything for the trip. . . .

Even only this short passage impresses on the reader a sense that the deal with the lupins will fail (Maruzza “felt black at heart,” the lupins had to be bought on credit and were not in peak condition), and once the boat has sunk in a storm and padron ‘Ntoni lost not only the lupins but also his son Bastianazzo, the family is doomed. To pay back the debt, 'Ntoni pawns the house and sells his boat, and—due to the loss in social and economic status—

13. Verga, I Malavoglia, trans. Landry, 7–8. The original Italian is as follows: “Intanto l’annata era scarsa e il pesce bisognava darlo per l’anima dei morti, ora che i cristiani avevano imparato a mangiare carne anche il venerdì come tanti turchi. Per giunta le braccia rimaste a casa non bastavano più al governo della barca, e alle volte bisognava prendere a giornata Menico della Locca, o qualchedun’altro. Il re faceva così, che i ragazzi se li pigliava per la leva quando erano atti a buscarsi il pane; ma sinché erano di peso alla famiglia, avevano a tirarli su per soldati; e bisognava pensare ancora che la Mena entrava nei diciassett’anni, e cominciava a far voltare i giovanotti quando andava a messa. ‘L’uomo è il fuoco, e la donna è la stoppa: viene il diavolo e soffia.’ Perciò si doveva aiutarsi colle mani e coi piedi per mandare avanti quella barca della casa del nespolo.

“Padron ’Ntoni adunque, per menare avanti la barca, aveva combinato con lo zio Crocifisso Campana di legno uno negozio di certi lupini da comprare a credenza per venderli a Riposto, dove compare Cinghialenta aveva detto che c’era un bastimento di Trieste a pigliar carico. Veramente i lupini erano un po’ avariati; ma non ce n’erano altri a Trezza. . . .

“Ma le donne hanno il cuore piccino, e padron ’Ntoni dovette spiegarle che se il negozio andava bene c’era del pane per l’inverno, e gli orecchini per Mena, e Bastiano avrebbe potuto andare e venire in una settimana da Riposto. . . . Così fu risoluto il negozio dei lupini, e il viaggio della Provvidenza, che era la più vecchia delle barche del villaggio, ma aveva il nome di buon augurio. Maruzza ne sentiva sempre il cuore nero, ma non apriva bocca, perché non era affar suo, e si affidacciava zitta zitta a mettere in ordine la barca e ogni cosa pel viaggio. . . .” (Giovanni Verga, I Malavoglia, in Tutti i romanzi, ed. Enrico Ghidetti, 3 vols. [Florence: Sansoni, 1983], 2:438–39).
the grandchildren can no longer count on good marriages. Most importantly, Verga’s intimate familiarity with the customs and language of his characters allows him to describe the events in a way that blurs the distinction between the narrator and the voice of the characters. Phrases such as “now that Christians had learned to eat meat on Fridays like so many Turks,” “you had to bring them up yourself,” and “man is fire, and woman the straw; the devil comes, and blows” (one of about 150 sayings used in the novel) convey a sense that we are listening not to the narrator but to the people themselves. The frequent use of dialect (inevitably lost in translation) and direct dialogue reinforces this effect of impersonality.

On the basis of this textbook verismo, German musicologist Egon Voss concluded in 1978 that late nineteenth-century operas have nothing to do with the ideas of verismo and that the composers of verismo operas were never even interested in the movement. But we can go further than this: the textbook definition of verismo outlined above manifests itself most radically in the novel, while being applicable to other genres only in part. Short stories such as the six-page Cavalleria rusticana, for instance, are too short to establish adequately the social, cultural, and political context, despite their coherent and logical development toward the catastrophe. Moreover, it is difficult to understand how Turiddu, returned from the army, could afford to roam around the village for weeks on end, surviving seemingly without having to do any work, or how he could say and do “just the things to worm his way into the good books” of Santuzza’s father and just hang “around the house and fill the girl’s ears with sweet nothings.” The textbook definition of verismo has to be stretched even further to apply to poetry, because poetry rarely focuses on the logical development of a story or a quasi-scientific and detached approach to describing the social, cultural, and political climate. It is thus not surprising that textbooks do not cover the poetry of Giosuè Carducci or Olindo Guerrini (writing under the pseudonym Lorenzo Stecchetti) in their chapters on verismo but rather in separate sections dedicated to authors who do not fit anywhere else (e.g., “Between Realism and Classicism”).

Drama, finally, presents a somewhat special situation. Federico de Roberto pointed out as early as 1890 that true impersonality could be achieved only in drama. But drama, which consists of dialogue and stage directions but no obvious narrator, by definition of its genre had always drawn on one of the most innovative elements of the textbook-eristic novel—direct speech—and thus already conveyed to the readers the sense of being present in the moment and of listening directly to the characters themselves. While some histories do

16. For example, Ferroni, Storia della letteratura italiana, 401.
17. He added, however, that even in drama the author cannot fully hide his voice because he inevitably judges his characters (Federico de Roberto, Processi verbali [Milan: Galli, 1890], vi–vii).
include brief discussions of drama in their chapters on verismo, they quickly point out the genre’s limitations in conveying the essence of the new aesthetic. Such limitations emerge with particular clarity from a comparison between *Caçmeria rusticana* the short story and its adaptation as a play (first performed in 1884). The play, for economic reasons, had to appeal to a more general audience, thus shifting the focus to the juicy aspect of adultery, whereas the economic motivation for Turiddu’s and Lola’s behavior in the short story, one of the essential characteristics of textbook verismo, disappeared. 18

Nevertheless, after 1867, when the term “verismo” first appeared in print, critics did discuss it in both poetry and drama. Stecchetti, for instance, wrote a collection of veristic poems and included a preface with an elaborate introduction defending the new aesthetic, and Dialma Carletti, while promoting verismo in novels (for the education and thus elevation of man), criticized it in poetry and drama, because poetry was meant to delight and drama to appeal to a general audience, for which he deemed verismo unsuitable. 19 Such arguments suggest that, at that time, verismo had either a broader meaning or a greater variety of meanings, and just a cursory examination of nineteenth-century criticism reveals that both of these assessments are correct: only later in its history was the term reconceived in a highly restricted sense.

Neither Verga nor Capuana could have played a crucial role in the conceptualization because neither ever referred to his theory as “verismo”; in fact, they both disliked the term and its application to their works. 20 Nevertheless,

20. Verga’s introductions to *Eva*, “L’amante di Gramigna” from *Vita dei campi*, and *I Malavoglia*—often cited as veristic manifestos—never use the term “verismo.” In an interview with the critic Ugo Ojetti, Verga used the related term “naturalismo” with reference to the “method” (“metodo”) of expressing a “thought” (“pensiero”), rather than the “thought” itself, but Capuana repeatedly insisted that the method per se had little or nothing to do with art and that true art could emerge only when content, form, and imagination corresponded (i.e., when the subject matter, the manner of expression, and power of invention matched and combined for a gripping experience). Verga’s statement appears in Ugo Ojetti’s *Alla scoperta dei letterati* (Milan: Dumolard, 1895), 66. For Capuana, see his *Gli “ismi” contemporanei*, 69: “The novelists confounded the materialistic concept with the positive method: and while they created this confusion, the Novel nevertheless drew on the method as well, highlighted it, made it imperceptibly penetrate their conscience. And they, not realizing the trick that was played on them, continued to chatter heartily about naturalism, positivism, verism, experimentalism, and similar theories that have little or nothing to do with art” (“I romanzieri confondevano il concetto materialista col metodo positivo: e intanto che essi commettevano l’imbroglio, il Romanzo però si serviva anche del metodo, lo metteva in evidenza, lo faceva insensibilmente penetrare nella loro coscienza; ed essi, non accorgendosi del tiro che veniva loro fatto, continuavano a ciarlare a tutto spiano di naturalismo, di positivismo, di verismo, di sperimentalismo e simili teoriche, le quali hanno poco o niente che vedere con l’arte”). See also Capuana’s *Per l’arte*, xxxv–xxxvi and xli–xlii.
late nineteenth-century critics associated Capuana and Verga with modern literary trends (variably labeled “realismo,” “naturalismo,” or “verismo”): Capuana was seen as the “first and most effective advocate of the naturalistic canons” and Verga as a representative of somewhat lesser relevance. With Luigi Russo’s Verga study of 1920, Verga’s impersonal method came to be seen as the essence of verismo, and Verga as the quintessential veristic author. Russo even implied—falsely—that Verga actually used the term “verismo” when describing his theory. For Russo, Verga was a successful representative of verismo in his own right and no longer stood in the shadow of Capuana.

[The] intrinsic character of Verga’s art . . . wants to be a vigorous social outcry but quickly fades and gives way to the relentlessness of what is real. And it lowers its tone or, better, assumes a tone of impassibility that is not one of indifference but which hides the suffering. This ethical attitude generates exactly the kind of art—a representation of life—that is at once scrupulous and heartfelt: scrupule and deep feeling, impersonality of style, and ethical interest merge in narration and generate what critics have called Verga’s verismo in an entirely technical and literary sense. . . . Here appears in its true light all the influence and the good that Capuana did for Verga. It is true, Capuana availed himself of this favor to his friend by imitating, popularizing, and enhancing his art. But it is certain that his lucidity as a critic and theorist of verismo was very useful to Verga in that [Capuana] was an incentive [for Verga] to go all the way without hesitation and without discouragement. Today, when one cannot speak highly of Verga without speaking badly of Capuana, we must give high honor to the latter for the influence he had on the spiritual formation of the greatest writer of narrative prose we have had in Italy since Manzoni.

21. See, for example, Edoardo Scarfoglio, Il libro di Don Chisciotte (Rome: A. Sommaruga, 1885), 122 and 124–26. The brief quotation (“fu il primo e più efficace predicatore dei canoni naturalisti”) appears on p. 122. Scarfoglio was a contributor to various journals, including the Fanfulla della domenica and the Nuova antologia, both espousing a moderate verismo. In 1885, he married Matilde Serao, a writer often associated with the final period of literary verismo. Other critics, too, imply Capuana’s greater historical significance. Salvatore Farina, for instance, in a brief historical sketch mentions Capuana more prominently than Verga (“Libri nuovi,” Rivista minima 13 [January 1883]: 77). For other authors referring to Verga or Capuana as verists, see G. Pozza, “Letteratura contemporanea: Luigi Capuana, Profili di donne,” La vita nuova 2 (1877): 275; or Ugo Ogetti’s open letter (1896) to Capuana, published in Capuana’s Gli “ismi” contemporanei, 40.

22. “[L’]intrinseco carattere dell’arte verghiana . . . vorrebbe essere un vigoroso grido sociale, ma . . . subito si smorza e cede davanti all’inesorabilità di ciò che è reale, e si abbassa di tono, o meglio assume un tono di impassibilità che non è d’indifferenza, ma nasconde la sofferenza. Questo atteggiamento etico genera appunto quell’arte, che è rappresentazione della vita, scrupolosa e commossa ad un tempo: scrupolo e commozione, impersonalità di stile e interesse etico, si fondono nel racconto e generano quello che i critici hanno chiamato il verismo del Verga in un senso tutto tecnico e letterario. . . . Qui appare nella sua vera luce tutta l’influenza e il bene che il Capuana fece al Verga; il Capuana si rivalse, è vero, di questo beneficio all’amico, imitandone e volgarizzandone e ingrossandone l’arte, ma resta assodato che la sua lucidità di critico e di teorico del verismo, giovò grandemente al Verga, in quanto a questi fu di spone a percorrere tutta la via intrapresa, senza esitazioni e senza scoraggiamenti. Oggi che non si può dir bene del Verga, senza dir male del Capuana, bisogna fare alto onore a quest’ultimo per quella influenza che egli
The impersonal style of narration had not always been associated with verismo. Salvatore Farina, critic, author of several novels, and editor of the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* noticed in one of his book reviews for the *Rivista minima*, for instance, that Capuana and Verga had abandoned the “brutture dell’anima umana” (“filth of the human soul”) of naturalism (which for Farina was synonymous with verismo) in favor of the formal aspects of “impartialism.”

The lack of a traditional association of impersonal narration with verismo explains why Russo’s view did not immediately take hold, even if it catapulted Verga into the limelight of critical attention. The two most significant verismo studies of the subsequent years, by Paul Arrighi (1937) and Giulio Marzot (1941), still acknowledge terminological problems and accordingly include literature of a wide variety of realistic impressions; only in their respective sections on “integral verismo” do they focus on the impersonal style of narration and all the other characteristics now presented in standard texts. Such texts no longer cover every writer from Manzoni to D’Annunzio but reserve the term “verismo” for the works of Capuana, Verga, and, variably, Federico De Roberto or Matilde Serao. While this narrow view may convey a more coherent concept of verismo, it stands in conflict with the more general concepts circulating in the later nineteenth century, which, as we shall see, offer a useful tool for understanding those changes in operas that were no longer compatible with Romantic *melodramma*.

**Background of the Term**

Verismo was widely discussed in Italian critical writings between 1870 and 1900, but none of the sources emphasizes the features emphasized by modern critics: meticulous observation of culture, politics, and language; logical development of the story toward a tragic ending; and impartiality. The quest of understanding verismo must thus begin with the first known mention of the

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23. Farina, “Libri nuovi,” 77. Farina was codirector of the *Rivista minima* during the 1870s. The journal was founded by Antonio Ghislanzoni (Verdi’s librettist for *Aida*) and promoted a moderate verismo. Farina was known as a critic who tried to maintain a balanced view of the various contemporary tendencies. See Roberto Bigazzi, *I colori del vero: Vent’anni di narrativa, 1860–1880* (Pisa: Nistri-Lisci, 1978), 221–33.


25. Most prominently Luca Clerici, who accepts verismo in the strict sense of the word only for Capuana, Verga, and De Roberto (*Invito a conoscere il verismo* [Milano: Mursia, 1989], 69–70).

26. I provide a full historical account of these concepts in my “Verismo,” in *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie*, ed. Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht and Albrecht Riethmüller (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 2004).
term and strictly avoid dilution by drawing on sources merely talking about “truth” (“verità”), “true art” (“arte vera”), or about related concepts such as “realism” and “naturalism.” While such a dilution would lead us to some of the roots of verismo (e.g., the beginning of Shakespeare reception in Italy, Shakespeare reception through Victor Hugo’s preface to Cromwell and its focus on the inclusion of the grotesque for the purpose of truth and reality, or the objective descriptions of reality in Manzoni’s I promessi sposi, first published 1825–26), it does not contribute anything essential to our findings and is already accessible in numerous studies. 27

The first known reference to verismo has nothing to do with literature at all. It appears in a review by Guido Guidi of a painting by Antonio Puccinelli entitled Cosimo Pater Patriae riceve i letterati e gli artisti del suo tempo (Cosimo, Father of the Fatherland Receives the Scholars and Artists of His Time; Fig. 1). 28 The meaning of Guidi’s term “veristi” is unfortunately opaque but seems to refer to artists who depict contemporary topics as opposed to artists who portray historical ones. Having set up this dichotomy, he fails to clarify the connection to the “veristi” and “idealisti”:

In art, I am glad to confess, I . . . belong neither to the group of those who, once they have done away with all contemporary subjects, cherish those that have already passed into the domain of history and ancient history, nor to [the group] that loathes what was and wants only what is. For me, any subject is acceptable as long as the concept manages to stir memories of glory or misfortune, a throb of joy, a sentiment of mercy, of terror, of admiration, and so on; the expression should be the result of logic, possible if not [necessarily] true, the fruit of a profound observation of the time and place in which the depicted people lived and worked.

Put as a general thesis, and without entering into the labyrinth of esthetic disquisition about academic precepts [and] doctrines of the idealisti and veristi, the subject of [Puccinelli’s] painting—with no fault of the artist on whom it was imposed—does not conform with my ideas, neither as a concept nor as expression: not as concept because more than a representative scene of an event, [the painting] is a collection of portraits, even if that’s what they are! Not as expression, because to the detriment of truth, [the painting] assembles people who


lived a long time apart who not only could not have found themselves in the presence of an already old Cosimo but probably never even knew each other. 29

Since Guidi wants to avoid the aesthetic arguments of the *idealisti* and *veristi* but does not hesitate to elaborate on logic and “profound observation,” he seems not to associate verismo with the latter qualities. Nevertheless, whether depicting subjects of the past or present (i.e., whether verist or idealist), the

29. “In arte, mi piace il confessarlo, io... non appartengono nè all’albergo di coloro che, banditi i soggetti contemporanei accarezzano quelli che passarono già nel dominio della storia, e della storia antica, nè a quella che chiama di ciò che fu e vuole soltanto ciò che è. Per me qualunque soggetto è trattabile, purché nel concetto valga a suscitare una memoria di gloria o di sventura, un palpito di gioia, un sentimento di pietà, di terrore, di ammirazione e via dicendo; nell’espressione raggiunga un risultato logico, possibile, se non vero, frutto di una profonda osservazione dei tempi e dei luoghi nei quali le persone figurate vissero e agirono.

“Posto [la mia estetica] in tesi generale, e senza entrare nel ginepraio delle disquisizioni estetiche dei precetti accademici, delle dottrine degli idealisti e dei veristi, il soggetto del quadro di [Puccinelli], non per colpa dell’artista cui fu imposto, non entra nell’ordine delle mie idee, nè come concetto, nè come espressione; non come concetto perché piuttosto che una scena rappresentativa di un fatto è una collezione di ritratti, se pure lo sono! Non come espressione, perché a scapito del vero sono insieme aggruppati personaggi che vissero a distanza di tempo e non solo mai poteronsi trovare insieme alla presenza di Cosimo già vecchio, ma mai forse neppure si conobbero fra loro” (Guidi, “Della statua,” 202–3).
artist should, in Guidi’s view, depict them logically and truthfully and not with “scholastic conventionality.”

The twenty-five years following Guidi’s observations saw a proliferation of widely varying concepts of verismo. One of the earliest—prominent in the early 1870s and first promoted in the Milanese periodical Rivista minima—described verismo as a balance between idealism and realism, as less extreme and thus better than pure realism. Proponents of verismo argued that realism—a sole reliance on perception as a measure of reality—was lacking the artistic element so important in literature and that realism needed to be balanced by a certain degree of idealism. Francesco De Sanctis, the leading Italian literary critic of the nineteenth century, reminded his readers: “The centripetal force harmonizing the real and the ideal is the true. All that exists is true, not only what exists in nature but also what exists in the mind. Verismo is a term not only barbarous but also false if taken to mean that only the real is true. The real and the ideal are both true.” Contrary to the concept offered in modern critical studies, nineteenth-century verismo could actually be more moderate than realism.

A second conceptualization of verismo, the “exaggeration” of realism, met with little critical acclaim but was frequently discussed. In the name of scrupulous imitation of reality, this type of verismo banned all traces of idealism, concentrating on the misery and immoral behavior of the lowest social classes, on prostitution, crime, and deformity for the sake of introducing new subjects to those readers who had tired of the same old themes. Critics denounced this type as immoral, because it was seen as seducing audiences to engage in the behavior depicted on paper. De Sanctis, who earlier had suggested a more moderate definition, came to assume an unambiguously critical view:

And then came the realists, more realists than reality. To them, what is fatherland? and what is humanity? and what is liberty? These are caprices, a world made without them and closed to them; art has nothing to do with them. Madame Bovary is more interesting than Ghita [a dubious figure in Boccaccio’s Decameron], above all more true. And while they [moderates such as Manzoni, who maintain a certain degree of idealism] are a bit in the clouds, the realists are looking for art in the mud, and the lowest social classes rise to become artistic topics. This period of archeological restoration and varnished filth and the painting of salons, playhouses, and vulgarity was a reaction against that ideal of convention [and] thus short-lived. It indicates a frivolous epoch of pleasures and affairs; every ideal has momentarily disappeared from the horizon. Realism no longer seemed a sufficiently expressive title for this art; it was

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30. Ibid., 204.
31. “La forza centripeta che armonizza reale e ideale, è il vero. Tutto ciò che esiste, è vero, non solo ciò che esiste nella natura, ma ancora ciò che esiste nella mente. Il verismo è un vocabolo non solo barbaro, ma falso, se si vuole intendere che sia vero quello solo che è reale. Reale e ideale sono tutti e due il vero” (Francesco De Sanctis, “L’ideale,” Rivista minima 7, no. 24 [1877]: 371). See also Bigazzi, I colori del vero, 222n.
called *verismo*, and there is nothing less true than this ugly, vulgar, mutilated, and exaggerated life. 32

A few years later Pasquale Melucci, a professor of civil law at the University of Modena, lamented a similar artistic decline: “In certain modern dramas, comedies, and novels, it seems that the writer, out of that mania to copy nature and withdraw from the true, cannot take a step except into ugliness, deformity, obscenity, vulgar brutality, as if every kind affect, every generous heartbeat, every magnanimous and beneficent thought no longer found any echo or hospitality in the heart and intellect of men.” 33

Such accounts legitimize the concept Mosco Carner had in mind when he referred to Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca* (1900) as a verismo opera, citing excess, erotic desire, brutal murder, and a fast-paced dramaturgy of juxtaposition as the principal reasons for his characterization. 34 Several prominent scholars have questioned the validity of Carner’s concept, even though it is obviously rooted in nineteenth-century literary criticism; 35 in fact, Victorien Sardou, who provided the sources for Puccini’s *Tosca* and Umberto Giordano’s *Fedora*, is expressly counted among the verismo authors in such popular texts as Lorenzo Stecchetti’s *Nova polemica* and the anonymous *Verismo di un lep-*

32. “E vennero i realisti, più realisti della realtà. A costoro, che patria? e che umanità? e che libertà? sono fisme, un mondo fatto senza di loro e chiuso a loro; l’arte non ci ha nulla a vedere. Madama Bovary è più interessante che Ghita, sopratutto più vera. E perchè quelli stavano un po’ nelle nuvole, questi cercarono l’arte nella melma, e bassi fondi sociali vennero su e divennero motivi artistici. Questo periodo di riabilitazioni archeologiche e di sozzure invernicate e di pittura da salons, da case da gioco e da trivial, fu reazione a quell’ideale di convenzione, perciò poco durevole. Segna un’epoca frivolità di piaceri e di affari, scomparso momentaneamente dall’orizzonte ogni ideale. Realismo non parve a quest’arte un titolo abbastanza espressivo; si chiamò il verismo, e non ci è niente di meno vero di questa vita brutta, volgare, mutilata ed esagerata” (Francesco De Sanctis, *Nuovi saggi critici*, 2nd ed. [Naples: Morano, 1879], 380). It was not usual for critics to present distinct concepts of verismo, often within the same text. In his *Verismo ed idealismo in arte* (Modena: E. Sarasino, 1892), for instance, Pasquale Melucci sees verismo both as a one-sided depiction of the ugly sides of life (see the following quotation) and as a photographic depiction of the models “that strike our perception” (p. 28).

33. “In certi drammi, commedie, romanzi moderni, sembra che lo scrittore, per quella mania di copiare la natura e ritrarre dal vero, non possa muovere un passo che non sia nel laido, nel deforme, nell’osceno, nella brutalità volgare; come se davvero ogni affetto gentile, ogni palpito generoso, ogni pensiero magnanimo e benefico non trovi più eco ed albergo nel cuore e nell’intelletto degli uomini” (Melucci, *Verismo ed idealismo in arte*, 40). He refers in particular to such works as Verga’s *Cavalleria rusticana* and Zola’s *Nana* and *Germinal*.


35. Critics who reject Carner’s concept of verismo include Voss, “Verismo in der Oper,” 311; and Sansone, “Verismo: From Literature to Opera,” 16. Sansone believes that *Tosca* “exemplifies a false idea of verismo” and accepts Carner’s concept only in the sense of “musico-dramatic techniques of the Young Italian School . . . [in which sense] ‘verismo’ might be as good as any other label to identify a known product.” Sansone criticizes Carner, however, for connecting “that meaning with the literary movement . . . .”
dotteroin aspettativa. Unlike De Sanctis, Melucci, and many others who criticized the purely vulgar texts, those in accord with Stecchetti’s *Nova polemica* saw in the vulgar topics an element of reality, a neglected counterpart to the positive aspects of life and thus a necessary realistic corrective. They intended that verismo describe life exactly the way it was, in both its ugly and beautiful facets, to hold up a mirror to society, and to draw attention to its flaws, which they hoped would arouse social activism and eventually lead to social change. Though this verismo describes both the vulgar and the beautiful, it fails to engage the issue of idealism:

Verismo . . . rejects [the intolerant banner of *Art for the Sake of Art*] and raises another one, more sympathetic and more grandiose: *Art for the Sake of the Best*. . . . For us [veristi], the philosophy that inspires us is socialism. We are the singing vanguard of the mob, [which is] filthy, shaggy, bloody, infected by pellagra and scrofula, enslaved due to starvation, drunk due to misery, a prostitute pregnant with lightning bolts. With satire, disobedience, [and] bohemian anarchy, we are sweeping the path to the future, a future [that is] no longer bourgeois or political but social, humanitarian. 37

A third conceptualization of verismo promotes a style or art-historical period reacting against idealism, classicism, and—most importantly for our purposes—conventional content, form, and language. This concept in part overlaps with those of De Sanctis (who advocated that the idealism of past writings be held in check by a certain degree of realism), Guidi (who criticized the conventionality implicit in historical subjects such as Puccinelli’s painting), and Stecchetti (who rejected imitation of the great writers). 38 The first known

36. Stecchetti, *Nova polemica*, 64; *Verismo di un lepidottero in aspettativa*, 45. See also Carlo Pietropaoli, *L’arte e il verismo* (Aquila: Bernardino Vecchioni, 1885), 21. At the end of his prologue, after having come to the defense of verismo, Stecchetti rejects verismo as an aesthetic concept, arguing that “there are neither veristi nor idealisti. There are authors who write well and authors who write badly; that’s it” (“Non ci sono né veristi né idealisti. Ci sono degli autori che scrivono bene e degli altri che scrivono male; ecco tutto”); p. 87. Stecchetti’s verdict does not, however, invalidate his stylistic distinctions of the two trends.


38. Francesco De Sanctis, *La letteratura italiana nel secolo XIX: Scuola liberale—scuola democratica; Lessioni raccolte da Francesco Torraca e pubblicate con prefazione e note da Benedetto Croce* (Naples: Antonio Morano, 1897), 237–38; Guidi, “Della statua,” 204. De Sanctis’s book consists of lectures originally held at the University of Naples, 1872–73 (Scuola liberale) and 1873–74 (Scuola democratica). See also Stecchetti, *Nova polemica*, 36: “Ma veneriamo il Petrarcha, non i petrarchisti” (“But we admire Petrarch, not the Petrarchists”). One might also mention the prologue of Pietro Cossa’s play *Nerone*, where the character Menecrate suggests that the author stick
explicit definition of verismo as an alternative to idealism appears in Bartolomeo Veratti’s 1873 series of Studj filologici and is subsequently quoted and reprinted in Pietro Fanfani and Costantino Arlia’s dictionary of “debased italianità”:

Verismo has been described as the method of those practitioners of the arts of design who abhor all that is ideal [and who] want to adhere strictly to pure reality. Those who called it realism, in opposition to idealism, would perhaps run the risk of some confusion with the philosophical systems of the old realists, nominalists, conceptualists, idealists, etc. However it may be, I am not so arrogant as to authenticate or condemn this term but [will] rely on the worthy guardians of our language.39

In late nineteenth-century literary criticism, idealism implied reliance not only on imagination but also, in a negative sense, on traditional models with their conventions of content, form, and language. Under certain circumstances, verismo could provide a viable alternative. Felice Cavallotti—a writer now commonly associated with scapigliatura (on which see pp. 300–301 below) and, more broadly, liberal political tendencies of the post-Risorgimento period—refers to a group of “youngsters” who understand verismo as a type of literature that avoids mythological and classical subjects and unpronounceable words (“parole che leghino i denti”).40 A similar but more specific assessment appears in a collection of letters by Andrea Gabrieli, a little-known contemporary:

In fact, if verismo signifies the necessity of saying what one feels, escaping conventional manners, not stepping beyond naturalness, using simple and clear forms without the starch or the shackles of pedantry, pure and natural language, presenting oneself for what one is and does, without posing, for example, in the leopardian, manzonian, carduccian, [or] heineian manner if one is not Manzoni, Leopardi, Carducci, or Heine; and that it is not necessary to live to the laws of verismo and banish from the stage “verse that makes noise without saying anything” (“il verso ch’ha romore e non idea”). See Pietro Cossa, Nerone: Commedia in cinque atti ed in versi (Rome: Cuggiani, 1871), 12.


40. Felice Cavallotti, Anticaglie, 3rd ed. (Rome: Tipografia del Senato, 1879), 7. Anticaglie consists of a collection of Cavallotti’s poems; his views on verismo appear in the introduction, entitled “Del verismo e della nova metrica.” The anonymous text Verismo di un lepidottero in aspettativa objects to “inundating the so-called models of language with passionate incense” (“d’inondare d’incenso appassionato i cosiddetti modelli di lingua”), which will never allow literature to “be anything but a varied stereotype of sifted lexica” (14–15).
outside one’s own time and to sing about Tirsi and Filli, Cupid and Venus, as the Arcadians have done, while Italy was gasping under the hooves of foreign horses . . . [then] I am with you, and I agree with you.\(^{41}\)

Such objections to convention and imitation figure prominently in critical literature of the time but are usually directed against conventionality rather than the conventions themselves. At some point, the potential of a set of conventions is naturally exhausted and younger artists and critics—concerned with new issues, passions, and aspirations—perceive them as insincere and derivative.\(^{42}\) Verismo thus condemns not tradition so much as anachronistic appropriation of its conventions. In this light, De Sanctis could point to Zola as an artist who “fights every conventional tendency” and, in his role of innovator, “recaptured tradition.”\(^{43}\)

Verismo has also been associated with a distinct historical period. While most critics made such an association only in passing, Dialma Carletti provides a clear-cut sequence of literary movements: “Our literature proceeds by way of reactions: to the seventeenth century is opposed the reaction in Arcadia, which goes from bad to worse; to Arcadia Classicism, which goes too far; to Classicism Romanticism, which gives way to exaggeration; and to Romanticism Verismo, and . . . I will say later what it does.”\(^{44}\) Such observations resurface, but without any explicit connection to their nineteenth-century predecessors, in prominent authors later in the twentieth century. Both Rodolfo Celletti (in his oft-cited entry on verismo in the *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*) and Manfred Kelkel (in one of the most extensive studies currently available on verismo) associate the reactions against convention with an art-historical period. But since they have not been able to document their interpretation, they simply assert it, as a convenience.\(^{45}\)

41. “Di fatti se verismo significa che bisogna dire quello che si sente, fuggire le maniere convenzionali, non uscire fuori la naturalezza, usar forma semplice e chiara senza l’amido o le pastoie della pedanteria, lingua schietta e nativa; palesarsi per quello che si è e si vale, senza posare, verbigrizia, alla leopardiana, alla manzoniana, alla carducciana, all’heiniana, quando non si è nè Manzoni, nè Leopardi, nè Carducci, nè Heine; che non bisogna vivere fuori il proprio tempo e cantare di Tirsi e Filli, di Cupido e di Citera, come gli Arcadi antichi, mentre l’Italia boccheggiava sotto la zampa dei cavalli stranieri . . . fin qui ci sono e mi ci fermo anch’io” (Andrea Gabrieli, *Rancidumi* [Milan: Battezzati, 1880], 11–12).


44. “La nostra letteratura procede per via di reazioni: al seicentismo s’oppone la reazione nell’Arcadia e va di male in peggio, all’Arcadia il classicismo e trasmoda, al classicismo il romantico e dà in esagerazioni, al romantico il verismo e . . . dirò dopo cosa fa” (Celletti, *Il verismo in poesia*, 7). See also *Verismo di un lepidottero in aspettativa*, 6; and Mario Rinaldi, *Musica e verismo: Critica ed estetica d’una tendenza musicale* (Rome: De Santis, 1932), 73. Italian literature in particular seemed stuck in clichés and in dire need of reform.

Thus, it seems that Hans-Joachim Wagner’s indirect question, which opened this essay, remains unanswered, and we are left with either a clearly defined textbook verismo that has little relevance for opera—even of a restricted repertoire—or a definition based on a relatively wide repertoire that has little terminological legitimacy. But in fact, as we shall see, it is possible to develop a conceptualization of verismo that is both relevant to opera and terminologically precise.

Periodization

Literary histories, whether French, Italian, or German, distinguish between Romanticism and a general “realism” that reacts in some way against Romanticism and evolves into a more extreme form of “verismo” or “naturalism.”46 Art histories recognize similar periods.47 Only music histories have avoided such a distinction and captured almost all nineteenth-century music under the general heading “Romantic” or “The Nineteenth Century.”48 More specialized surveys tend to agree on a turning point in the 1860s but interpret the repertoire of the subsequent decades in distinct and often problematic ways, almost always singling out verismo as only one of many distinct trends.


Italian literature: Ferroni’s Dall’Ottocento al Novecento includes a chapter called “Restaurazione e Risorgimento (1815–61),” which ends with a section entitled “Verso una nuova realtà” (“Towards a New Reality”), reaching “Al di là del Romanticismo” (“Beyond Romanticism”); this is followed by a chapter on “La nuova Italia (1861–1910),” which includes the sections on scapigliatura, verismo, and naturalism, among others.


47. Frederick Hartt’s Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4th ed. (New York: Abrams, 1993), follows the chapter on “Romanticism” with a chapter on “Realism”; and Hugh Honour and John Fleming’s The Visual Arts: A History, 6th ed. (New York: Abrams, 2002), distinguishes periods of “Romanticism” and “Realism” but treats them in a single chapter. Hartt not only associates realism with an art-historical period but evokes our central idea of abandoning convention when he quotes Gustave Courbet’s declaration that realism “awakened the very forces of man against paganism, Greco-Roman art, the Renaissance, Catholicism, and the gods and demigods, in short against the conventional ideal” (Art, 902).

John Rosselli, for instance, sees in the years between Italian unification and World War I a “Decline of a Tradition,” the meaning of which remains somewhat vague. He claims that the “creative springs that had produced a continual stream of new works in the days of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and the young Verdi were running low” but praises the quality of Verdi’s later works. And while he sees in verismo opera the “product of the new Italy with its European pretensions covering serious inadequacies,” he sees in its composers “selfconsciously modern and literary-minded” artists seemingly part of a new tradition rather than an old one. 49 Gilles de Van, on the other hand, sees in the same period a second (i.e., more radical) Romanticism, in which verismo continues a traditional dramaturgy but imbues it with “passionate stories pushed to their limits” (“histoires passionnelles poussées jusqu’aux limites”). 50 While such an interpretation seems to make good sense at first glance, it identifies a trend of which the beginning could, with equal justification, be located much earlier.

David Kimbell, in his survey of Italian opera, divides the century similarly, but has to capture the various late nineteenth-century works (grand opera, the operas of the scapigliati, Verdi’s collaborative efforts with Boito, and verismo) under an accordingly eclectic heading (“Cosmopolitanism and Decadence”). In his contribution to the Cambridge History of Italian Literature, published five years later, he changes the heading to the purely temporal “Opera since Unification” but discusses essentially the same repertoire. 51 Although he mentions the “vogue for what is commonly called operatic verismo,” he cautions that operatic verismo has little to do with the “real” (i.e., literary) verismo. 52 Those who do accept verismo as a style period restrict it to the works of the giovane scuola, from Cavalleria rusticana through those of Puccini. 53 The operas between Romanticism and verismo either fall by the wayside or are, as in Nicolaisen’s study, relegated to a period of transition.

Not all history texts locate the beginning of a significant new trend in the 1860s. Donald Grout and Hermine Williams, for instance, divide nineteenth-century Italian opera into “Primo Ottocento,” which is stretched to include


Verdi’s *Otello* and *Falstaff*, and the “Later Nineteenth Century,” which begins with Alfredo Catalani and Alberto Franchetti, includes the verists Antonio Smareglia, Mascagni, and Leoncavallo, and ends with Puccini and Giordano. Both the end of the *primo Ottocento* and the beginning of the late nineteenth century in the 1880s appear arbitrary. And finally, Sieghart Döhring and Sabine Henze-Döhring focus on the internationalization of opera since Verdi’s *La traviata*, visible in the disintegration of *melodramma* through cross-fertilization primarily with French genres such as *grand opéra* and *drame lyrique*. For Döhring and Henze-Döhring the integrity of the genre as an ideal generating new works disappears. Verismo marks a clarification of this development (“eine Verdeutlichung des ‘Gattungsverlusts’”) and a “break with opera of the immediate past.” As in Rosselli’s argument, this strange hybrid of at once concluding a development and beginning a new one illustrates particularly well just how much of a problem defining operatic verismo has become.

Conceptualizing verismo as a post-Romantic operatic period seems more credible once we realize that the most progressive operas of the 1860s roughly coincide with the earliest mention of verismo in Italian criticism. With the 1860s, the conventions of Romantic opera begin to disappear at an increasing pace, and this departure offers a useful and historically legitimate parallel to the rise of verismo, especially when we stop to consider how long Italian opera had adhered to conventions of language, plot, form, and production. Several of these conventions disappear with Verdi’s *Don Carlos* (premiered at the Paris Opéra in 1867, first performed as an “Italian” opera in Bologna later that year, and since then performed primarily in Italian rather than in French) and with Boito’s *Mefistofele* (1868). The subsequent twenty years—associated by Nicolaisen with a “Transition” and by Julian Budden with a “Problem of Identity”—show the struggle for approaches that are less encumbered by convention. Budden, encouraged by the political changes in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war, goes so far as to designate 1870 as a turning point: “It is always tempting to find a historical turning-point at the beginning of a decade, and usually wrong. But the year 1870 provides a legitimate exception to the

56. Bianconi has already pointed to the changing “rapport with tradition” (“il rapporto con la tradizione”) and “the avant-garde that aims to overthrow the traditions and to anticipate the taste of the future” (“l’avanguardia, che mira a sovvertire le convenzioni e ad anticipare il gusto del futuro”); *Il teatro d’opera in Italia*, 81.
57. Most of the music written for the first performance of *Mefistofele* at La Scala in 1868 but cut for the 1875 revision does not survive. Boito discarded some of the most progressive passages, making a complete assessment of the original version’s revolutionary nature impossible. Only the libretto, the Elena-Faust duet in act 4, and the “Intermezzo sinfonico” survive. See Alison Terbell Nikitopoulos, “Arrigo Boito’s *Mefistofele*: Poetry, Music, and Revisions” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1994), 134–35 and 187–88.
rule; enough happened then and immediately afterward to give a new direction to Italian music in general.” 58 Budden’s discussion of the operas of the following two decades, however, highlights the “Problem of Identity” rather than the “turning-point”: Boito’s Mefistofele (revised in 1875 and 1876) and Verdi’s Otello are excluded as special cases; Puccini’s Le Villi (1884) and Edgar (1889) are virtually ignored; and the form of the works by Gomes, Ponchielli, and Catalani is characterized as a holdover of “the grand Parisian genre as handed down by Meyerbeer and Gounod.” 59 Italian opera did change. But change came gradually and sometimes without immediate consequences, and the boundaries between Romanticism and the subsequent period are blurred and impossible to pinpoint to a specific year or even decade.

I propose therefore that the changes best be seen as an emerging verismo—not a verismo in the sense of the textbook definition discussed earlier or a narrow concept derived from Cavalleria rusticana and Pagliacci (1892) but rather in the sense often conveyed in nineteenth-century criticism: as a break with convention. 60 Seen in this way, verismo does not begin but is fully realized in the 1890s and the early twentieth century, and works such as Don Carlo, Mefistofele, La Gioconda, and Otello are not isolated masterpieces sui generis but milestones on the path to this realization. Thus, rather than complain that a broader concept of verismo might render the term virtually meaningless, 61 we might adopt it as a useful periodic designation of Italian opera. Just as with other historical style periods, we must, of course, avoid categorical judgments: an opera may be more or less veristic, depending on the number of abandoned Romantic conventions (Cavalleria rusticana is more veristic than Otello in subject matter, Otello is more veristic than Cavalleria in formal

59. Ibid. 3:291.
60. To describe the process of breaking with convention, Carl Dahlhaus uses the term “Realismus” (Die Musik des 19. Jahrhunderts, vol. 6 of Neues Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft [Wiesbaden: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenasion, 1980], 233). But as I have shown above, “verismo” (as understood in the nineteenth century) is the better choice. Despite such phrases as “a slice of life” (“uno squarcio di vita”) and “he took inspiration from the true” (“al vero ispiravasi”) in the prologue of Pagliacci, Leoncavallo did not, to the best of my knowledge, associate his opera with verismo. Neither his account “Come nacquero i Pagliacci” (L’opera 2, no. 2 [1966]: 40–44); nor Sansone’s study “The Verismo of Ruggero Leoncavallo: A Source Study of Pagliacci” (Music and Letters 70 [1989]: 342–62); nor Rossana Dalmonte’s “Il prologo dei Pagliacci: Nota sul verismo in musica” (Musica/Realtà no. 8 [1982]: 105–14) gives any indication of Leoncavallo’s having used the term with regard to his opera.
continuity). Since early verismo did not produce an “ideal type” (to use Carl Dahlhaus’s term) that combined all the characteristics commonly associated with verismo, the modern critical tradition has tried to explain departures from Romantic conventions as special cases, all the while missing an important general trend and causing considerable consternation in the process.\footnote{Idealtypesaremodelsagainstwhichotherworks caneffectivelydefined. Carl Dahlhauswrites: “Idealtypes are not the substance of operatic history but aids to conceptualizing this work or that, while an opera’s standing as a work of art rests on its individuality. There is a connection, to be sure, between the various elements from which ideal types are constructed, but almost always in historical reality some drop out while others are added. This is not a defect in the construction, as such, but one of the conditions under which the ideal type fulfills its purpose, which is to demonstrate that the particularities of historical phenomena are modifications of a general type and, as such, accessible to conceptual definition. “To be effective, an ideal type requires a certain minimum number of affinities between musical-dramatic structural traits. It is admittedly impossible to draw a line, saying ‘the concept is useful thus far and no further’ ” (“The Dramaturgy of Italian Opera,” in \textit{The History of Italian Opera}, ed. Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, vol. 6, \textit{Opera in Theory and Practice, Image and Myth}, trans. Kenneth Chalmers and Mary Whittall [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 82). This is exactly the issue regarding verismo. Does a “certain minimum of affinities” exist to allow us to speak of an “ideal type” of a verismo opera? Dahlhaus offers the following options: Either we abandon all conception of an ideal type with respect to modern opera, or we relax the conditions it must fulfill” (83). I follow the latter option, in line with nineteenth-century criticism.}

It would, of course, be unrealistic to expect acceptance of verismo as a conceptually unified period in operatic history in the near future, if ever. We have spent too much energy narrowing down the term’s meaning and sorting out the various other developments of the time for a complete reconceptualization to be practical. Due to the long-inculcated twentieth-century constructs, it simply does not sound right to refer to \textit{Mefistofele, La Gioconda, Don Carlo}, or even \textit{Otello} as verismo operas. But if we were able to open our minds to a broader concept, in the sense of a period increasingly breaking with the conventions of Romantic \textit{melodramma}, verismo would indeed present itself as an ideal term.

\section*{Breaking with Operatic Conventions}

The earliest references to a musical verismo predate the premiere of \textit{Cavalleria rusticana} by at least ten years. In a letter to Giulio Ricordi of 20 November 1880, Verdi ranted against verismo, associating it with the calculated musical progress of harmonic artifices at the cost of simple and spontaneous melody:

> Ah, progress, science, verismo...! Ah, ah! ... Verist as long as you want, but . . . Shakespeare was a verist, but he did not know it. He was a verist by inspiration; we are verists by intention, out of self-interest. Then it’s all the same,
Three years later, the philosopher Antonio Velardita similarly objected to this tendency: “[Verismo] has destroyed everything, including the melodramma, where there is an abundance of effects, dazzling scenes, choruses, and dances interwoven with song, all designed to strike the senses; but [now] the old melody can no longer be found, only harmony.” And another year later, Amintore Galli (the Italian critic and composer, who sat on the jury that selected Cavalleria rusticana as the winner of the 1889 Sonzogno competition) singled out the final scenes of acts 3 and 4 of Bizet’s Carmen as veristic. Although he does not define the term, he implies that veristic music powerfully reveals universal, psychological truths implicitly associated with freedom from convention (in contrast to verismo, realism is associated with aspects of local color):

In all these scenes [i.e., the final scenes of acts 3 and 4], Bizet does not make use of local color (except as an accessory), does not indulge in naked realism but keeps to a psychological truth that belongs to all places, all peoples, and all times. He replaces material characteristics by moral and universal facts, and his art is free of any convention. . . . He amazes you with the marvelous veristic scene that makes up the impressive and moving catastrophe of the opera.

Scholars have located unconventional harmony in a wide variety of operas. While Guido Salvetti points to the “pure” dissonances of Franco Faccio’s...
Amleto (1865), Budden focuses on violations of harmonic grammar when, for instance, a “Dorian” C♯ clashes with the key of E minor as Santuzza tells Lucia about her unrequited love for Turiddu in Cavalleria rusticana (Ex. 1). For Roman Vlad, on the other hand, truly innovative harmony appears already in Cavalleria rusticana, the harmonic language of which he deems so modern as to anticipate Debussy’s.

Even though the frame of reference of Budden’s “grammar” remains obscure and non-functional harmonic progressions do occur prominently in Cavalleria rusticana, they are hardly new. Prominent examples have been identified in the scene between Leonora and her father at the beginning of La forza del destino and the storm scene from Otello. In the 1884 version of the duo between Rodrigo and King Philip from Don Carlo (where Rodrigo openly accuses Philip of enforcing a peace reminiscent of a graveyard), the harmony explodes in an enharmonic spelling of an augmented-sixth chord (with E–G♭–B♭ spelled as E–F♯–B♭), which does not resolve to F minor but through a series of grating chromatic passing tones lands on an open fifth E–B before giving way to a new section in A minor (Ex. 3). The harmony is hardly less daring than in the passage from Cavalleria rusticana. In fact, Budden concedes that in the Don Carlo example “Verdi seems to anticipate the ‘Veristi’” but does not clarify why the harmony in Manon Lescaut and not that of the Rodrigo-Philip duo should mark the beginning of verismo.

A similar example occurs at the end of the Council Chamber Scene from Simon Boccanegra (1881). The Doge suspects that his daughter was abducted upon orders of his favorite courtier, Paolo, and forces him to curse the
Example 1  Pietro Mascagni, *Cavalleria rusticana*, Santuzza’s romanza

Largo assai sostenuto

Example 2  Giacomo Puccini, *Manon Lescaut*, act 3, R21 (vocal parts omitted)

Largo sostenuto

Example 3  Giuseppe Verdi, *Don Carlo*, act 2, tableau 2, scene 6 (duo Rodrigo-Filippo; 1884 version)
perpetrator (i.e., himself) in front of all present. The highly declamatory vocal line sounds over a series of diminished and dominant seventh chords, which in their dark orchestration sound particularly dissonant. Instead of resolving, these chords simply progress to the next dissonance (Ex. 4a) and are repeatedly punctuated by chromatic three-note descents, themselves ending on a dissonance. Once the seventh chords do resolve to C and the chorus echoes the curse, pianissimo, Verdi maintains dissonance by a virtually sustained F♯ in the bass (Ex. 4b). Only after thirteen measures does the dissonance resolve for good and the act conclude with a six-measure instrumental postlude.

Around 1880, both Verdi and Velardita noticed in contemporary opera a departure from the harmony of Romantic melodramma, and both negatively referred to it as verismo. If the harmonic progressions just described indeed belong to an emerging verismo, Verdi’s complaint in his letter to Ricordi would appear hypocritical, but it would hardly be the first instance in which Verdi’s words and actions clash.

In addition to harmony, the dramaturgy of Italian opera—i.e., the aesthetics of dramatic structure—sheds many of the Romantic conventions. Describing what they perceived as new plots, critics noticed a shift towards the representation of low social classes and the raw and usually love-driven emotions of the protagonists. Ferdinand Pfohl, for instance, lamented that in operas such as Puccini’s Le Villi (1884), Pierantonio Tasca’s A Santa Lucia (1892), and Alfredo Catalani’s La Wally (1892), the low-class protagonists are degraded to animals, driven only by their sexuality. He also wrote that the Romantic feelings of patriotism, sacrifice, and faithfulness, which, he maintained, also existed among the low social classes, play no role in verismo opera. The decadent plots that so disturbed Pfohl have their roots in such characters as Rigoletto, the Duke of Mantua, Azucena, and Violetta from Verdi’s middle-period operas. Such plots are more prominent in Ponchielli’s La Gioconda (1876; where the protagonist is a street singer and the illegitimate love between Laura and Enzo is condoned) and his Marion Delorme (1885; where, in a combination of elements also found in La traviata [1853], Andrea Chénier [1896], and Tosca, a prostitute becomes entangled in a web of love and politics and, after having given herself to a powerful politician in the hope of saving her lover, sees him dragged off to execution). Such plots


70. Heinz Kindermann sees the beginning of operatic realism (a period framed by Romanticism and verismo) in the middle-period operas by Verdi, pointing to the inclusion of a hunchback (Rigoletto) and a fallen woman (La traviata), the reflection of the risorgimento, and Verdi’s care for realistic staging and sets (Theatergeschichte Europas, vol. 7, Realismus [Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1965], 256–60).

Example 4  Giuseppe Verdi, *Simon Boccanegra*, act 1, scene 12 (council chamber scene, 1881 version)

(a)

**DOGE**
(terribile)

Sia ma-le - det - to! e tu ri-pe-ti il giu - ro.

(cupo e terribile a Paolo)

(b)

**TUTTI**

Sia ma-le - det-to!! sia ma-le - det-to!! sia ma-le[detto]

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eventually culminate in the operas by Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and Puccini. The moral pillars Pföhl misses in these operas—patriotism, sacrifice, faithfulness, and, we might add, religion—are, of course, exactly the ideals nineteenth-century proponents of verismo sought to challenge.  

Pföhl’s focus on the animalistic tendencies of verismo, however, caused him to miss the greater dramaturgical realism that eroded the conventions of Romantic opera, a realism Gilles de Van has identified as an important factor in the shift from “melodrama” to “music drama.” Maintaining that in Verdi’s work music drama never completely supersedes melodrama, he nevertheless traces a shift from one-dimensional characters to multi-dimensional characters, whose types, actions, and situations are no longer predictable and expressible by conventional means. The characters lose their unambiguous archetypal functions of “hero,” “heroine,” “tyrant,” “rival,” and “judge” and no longer interact with each other in standard juxtapositions of unambiguous gestures and feelings that in turn lead to standard sequences of arias and ensembles (scena, tempo d’attacco, adagio, tempo di mezzo, and cabaletta); instead, the characters gain in complexity and refinement in extended dialogue. Quoting the philosopher George Lukács, de Van invokes a core parameter of our concept of verismo: the break with convention. “Where psychology begins, monumentality ends. . . . Once psychology has entered into a life, then it is all up with unambiguous honesty and monumentality. When psychology rules, then there are no gestures any more that can comprise life and all its situations with them. The gesture is unambiguous only for as long as the psychology remains conventional.”

72. Angelo de Gubernatis explicitly associates the topics of “patria” and “famiglia” with idealism. See his “Rassegna delle letterature straniere” (Nuova antologia 14 [15 September 1879]: 377); quoted in Giovanni Torriano, “Naturalismo, realism, verismo: L’uso delle categorie critiche nella pubblicitica italiana sull’arte trà ottocento e novecento” (Tesi di laurea, University of Pavia, 1980), 32. See also De Sanctis, Nuovi saggi critici, 380; Pietropaoli, L’arte e il verismo, 17; and Marzot, Battaglie veristiche dell’Ottocento, 247.


Romantic opera achieves “monumentality” through juxtaposition of unambiguous gestures (such as falling on one’s knees in prayer or withdrawing with one’s hands covering the face), which are followed by a “tableau” expressing the appropriate feeling in one of the lyrical movements of the standard form. This dramaturgy of Romantic opera must be distinguished from a new dramaturgy, corresponding to de Van’s music drama, in which the archetypal functions and the gestures become more ambiguous and the “monumentality” of the subsequent tableau breaks down. De Van calls this process “miniaturization,” the gradual transformation of the Romantic scene structure into a freer succession of “tiny sections that mark, with far greater precision” the stages of a character’s development. This dramaturgy first appears in such mid-century works as *Stiffelio* and *La traviata* and continues in Boito’s *Mefistofele* and *Don Carlo*. A comparison of a conventional passage with an unconventional one may illustrate this dramaturgical change. *La traviata* still concludes with an ensemble, formally an *adagio* leading to a short *tempo di mezzo* in dialogue. The *tempo di mezzo* introduces an important event (the death of Violetta), but dramatic effects. He compares dramaturgically similar scenes from Cuvelier de Trie’s *Dago, ou Les mendians d’Espagne* (1806) and Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* (1830), concluding that the differences lie less in the actual dramaturgy than in the *drame romantique’s* more “lyrical,” “florid,” metaphorical language (63–64). For a helpful contemporary account of the characteristics of the melodramas by René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt (the genre’s founder), see his “Melodrama” (1832); his “Final Reflections on Melodrama” (1843); and Charles Nodier’s “Introduction” to Pixérécourt’s *Théâtre choisi* (1843), all trans. Daniel Gerould in Pixérécourt’s *Four Melodramas*, ed. and trans. Daniel Gerould and Marvin Carlson (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2002), xi–xix and 311–18.


while it propels the drama to a rapid conclusion, it does not in any way contribute to the development of the characters’ psychology. By contrast, the second half of act 4 of Otello, i.e., everything following Otello’s entrance, largely consists of dialogue, first Otello’s argument with Desdemona over her alleged guilt, then his exchange with Emilia on the failed coup and the confrontation with Jago, and finally Otello’s goodbye to Desdemona, who of course is no longer able to respond. The passage is a gem of psychological development. Directions in the libretto and the disposizione scenica for the pantomime preceding Desdemona’s awakening make it clear that Otello, despite his conviction of Desdemona’s guilt, is still torn between love and hate. Desdemona, for her part, only now begins to understand the seriousness of Otello’s threats, begging for time to prove her innocence. But with the concurrently planned murder of Cassio (who alone could prove Desdemona’s innocence) by the hand of Rodrigo, Otello seems to have eliminated all possibility for Desdemona to redeem herself. Only after having killed Desdemona and learned from Emilia about Jago’s scheme does Otello realize that he made a mistake. Until the very end of the opera, the characters develop dramatically, Emilia into a woman who finally stands up for what is right and Otello into a resigned hero whose glory has passed and who no longer has the energy to harm anyone. In the 1890s, this kind of ending becomes the norm, with Cavalleria rusticana (of which the final three scenes consist of dialogue) and Pagliacci (of which the entire “Commedia” consists of dialogue) as two of the most prominent examples.

In the 1860s, some Italian operas also began to break with conventions of vocabulary and verse. Arrigo Boito revitalized the genre with innovative poetic meters and vocabulary in his librettos Amleto (for Franco Faccio) and Mefistofele, and a couple of years later, Verdi and Ghislanzoni included in the final duet from Aida (Radames’s “Morir, si pura e bella”) a particularly interesting sequence of lyrical verse, which broke with the basically regular stanzas of nineteenth-century Italian opera. The stimulus for Verdi came not from Boito but from the rhythmic and metric variety of French verse, which Boito as well as other progressive Italians held up as a model for overcoming “that mighty dowry and mighty sin of Italian prosody which generates a meanness and poverty of rhythm within the musical phrase.”

79. Scott Balthazar has characterized librettos of this kind as linear, in contrast to the tectonic ones of Romantic opera, where relationships between the characters remain relatively constant (“Tectonic and Linear Form in the Ottocento Libretto,” 7).


doubtlessly an important figure on the path to irregular poetic meters and asymmetrical stanzas, we must not forget Verdi’s *Don Carlo*. The translation of irregular French meters into irregular Italian ones in a work by an Italian composer helped break down a long-held tradition. The trend continued with Luigi Illica, the librettist commonly credited with “breaking down the rigid system of Italian operatic metres into lines of irregular length.” His most famous librettos—Catalani’s *La Wally*, Giordano’s *Andrea Chénier* (1896), and, in collaboration with Giuseppe Giacosa, Puccini’s *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly* (1904)—all fall in the golden period of operatic verismo.

The language of opera librettos underwent similar changes. For much of the nineteenth century, librettists still drew on a conventional, stylized, elevated, and one might say idealist vocabulary. For “hope” they used the old-fashioned “speme” instead of the modern “speranza”; for “horse,” “destriero” instead of “cavallo”; for “hair,” “crine” instead of “capelli”; for “wings,” “vanni” instead of “ali,” to name just a few. Verdi’s *La traviata*, for example, a work based on a subject otherwise associated with realism, still bursts with poetic archaisms such as “deh non mutate in triboli le rose dell’amor” (“do not change into sadness the roses of love”) or “un di, quando le veneri il tempo avrà fugate” (“one day, when time has put your beauty to flight”). While Boito and his colleague Emilio Praga did not by any means introduce everyday language in their librettos, they enriched the conventional vocabulary just as suggested—and practiced—by the anonymous author of *Verismo di un lepidottero in aspettativa*. On the other hand, Stecchetti, more

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84. See also David R. Kimbell’s observation: “The Libretti of *La Wally* (by Illica), of *Manon Lescaut* (by Illica, Giacosa and several others) and of *Falstaff* (by Boito) all demonstrated the final obsolescence of the old ‘Code Rossini.’” (*Italian Opera*, 548).


86. *Verismo di un lepidottero in aspettativa*, 44. See also Salvetti, “La scapigliatura milanese e il teatro d’opera,” 578.
in line with the future trend of opera librettos, pointed to those who “were called veristi only for using the proper word where the others used the metaphor and [those who] point to the true sentiment where the others disguised it.”\(^{87}\) Since the 1890s, Illica’s interest in “verisimilitude . . . of the dialogue” and Giacosa’s interest in “creating that fictitious reality without which one can accomplish nothing” corresponded with our broad definition of verismo as a reaction against Romantic convention.\(^{88}\) Budden sums up the change with a few pointed examples from Puccini’s operas:

Composers saw no reason to follow the examples of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* in keeping to the lower end of the social scale; but they made their characters use the language of everyday in place of the stilted fustian that had obtained hitherto. If Puccini’s Bohemians sometimes become high-flown in their expressions they do so by way of parody; it is all part of their world of half-humorous make-believe. But they soon descend to plain language under stress. (“Ho un freddo cane,” exclaims Marcello—“I’m hellish cold!”) In 1841, in *Luigi Rotta*, Cammarano’s Michelangelo had taken leave of his carousing pupils with a lofty “I go to take my customary nutriment of milk.” Pinkerton more briefly offers Sharpless, “Milk punch or whisky?” without even the formality of a verb. A whole system of metres which had served Italian opera for two centuries quietly dissolved. Under the influence of Luigi Illica . . . quinari, senari, settenari, ottonari, decasillabi and endecasillabi gave way to casually rhymed—or even unrhymed—lines of irregular length referred to jokingly by Giuseppe Giacosa as “illicasillabi.”\(^{89}\)

**Verismo or Scapigliatura?**

The frequent references to Boito might suggest *scapigliatura* (Italian for “loose living” or “Bohemianism” and derived from Cletto Arrighi’s novel *La scapigliatura e il 6 febbraio*, 1862) as a term better suited than verismo to describe late nineteenth-century opera. Generally taken to encompass sentiments of rebellion and extreme Romantic tendencies popular in other European countries (especially France), as well as a determination to tear down tradition but without a viable alternative, *scapigliatura* resonates with some facets of nineteenth-century verismo. But the harsh rhetoric of the *scapigliati*, directed against the icons of Romantic art (Manzoni in literature and Verdi in music), has no parallel among the *veristi*, and while the *scapigliati* were often torn by

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87. “Furono chiamati veristi solo per questo, che usavano la parola propria dove gli altri usavano la metafora ed accennavano al sentimento vero dove gli altri velavano il proprio” (Stecchetti, *Nova polemica*, 72).
89. Budden, *Operas of Verdi* 3:280. *Cavalleria rusticana*, although commonly categorized as a verismo opera, still includes numerous examples of archaic language; of these, the opening chorus is just one example.
the conflicting forces of idealism, realism, and symbolism (influenced by Charles Baudelaire), the veristi were less overwhelmed by the past and thus freer to move in new directions. The veristi did not abandon convention out of protest against tradition but as a consequence of the search for new and exciting artistic solutions. Verdi held the tradition of Italian opera in high esteem, and even Mascagni did not intend to overthrow it. Finally, the scapigliati saw themselves as visionaries intending to shape an art that would uphold the glory of Italy; the veristi had no such ambitions.

Of the musicians associated with scapigliatura, only Boito had a relatively specific program—outlined in a critique of Giuseppe Rota’s Ginevra di Scozia—and his recommendations are easily covered by the concept of verismo we have outlined thus far. Boito lists four essential characteristics of a good new opera: “the complete obliteration of formula; the creation of form; the realization of the most immense tonal and rhythmic development possible today; [and] the supreme incarnation of the drama.” By formula, Boito probably meant the sequences of aria, rondo, cabaletta, stretta, ritornello, and pezzo concertato, but it might equally apply to the standard formulaic accompanimental patterns. And his reference to “tonal development” surely suggested, at least in part, the enrichment of the harmonic palette described earlier.

Acting and Singing

With the stylistic changes inherent in the operas came a new approach to acting and vocal interpretation. The new approach has been traced to the first interpreter of Carmen, Célestine Galli-Marié, who, not blessed with great vocal means, compensated with a kind of interpretation that was said to be “true and too realistic.” Galli-Marié in turn was imitated by several singers,
including Lison Frandin, Emma Calvé, and Gemma Bellincioni. In a review of Carmen with Frandin, critic Filippo Filippi particularly admired the protagonist’s realistic acting:

Carmen is a cold woman, cruel, lascivious, implacable with the victims of her seductions. Representing her on stage requires a balance between song and action, and it is necessary that the hidden fervor of her intemperate passions manifest itself and make a strong impression, as with Galli-Marié, whose enormous talent set the bar. Not giving way to excessive gesture nor any overly artificial facial expression, as in the first act, when, with the flower tightly between the provocative lips, she throws at Don José without losing her composure a cold glance in which there is all the drama still to come.96

This more natural style of acting had been introduced by Eleonora Duse, an Italian actress who became Boito’s lover two weeks after she had witnessed his success at the premiere of Otello on 5 February 1887.97 Performing without makeup, she abandoned conventional poses and gestures for seemingly spontaneous ones, communicated through the power of silence and plasticity of her voice, often spoke softly and with realistic expression, and, most importantly, succeeded in revealing the innermost emotions of the characters she portrayed. She was not afraid to abandon dignity and show the characters’ ugliness and sexual passions. As Helen Sheehy points out, Duse carefully researched and analyzed the characters she portrayed, but her “seemingly spontaneous gestures, like caressing her leading man’s cheek or touching his hair or body, without self-consciousness or formality, expressed a kind of easy sensuality that was fresh and true and most important, new, to audiences used to rote gestures.”98 While her colleagues—Sarah Bernhardt first and foremost among them—would use gestures to emphasize words, Duse would use them to express what words could not: “When I must express violent passion, when my spirit is gripped by pleasure and sorrow, I often am silent, and on stage I speak softly, barely murmuring.”99

96. “Carmen è una donna fredda, crudele, lasciva, implacabile con le vittime delle sue seduzioni; rappresentandola sulla scena ci vuole un equilibrio tra il canto e l’azione, bisogna che il calore latente delle sue passioni sregolate si avvera e si scolpisca come fà la Galli-Marié: della quale il pregio massimo è la misura. Il non trascendere in nessun gesto eccessivo, né in nessuna espressione troppo artificiosa del volto, come nel primo atto, quando con il fiore stretto tra le labbra proaci, getta, senza scomparire, quella fredda occhiata a Don José nella quale c’è tutto il dramma di là da venire” (La perseveranza, 14–15 April 1884); quoted in Landini, “I grandi cantanti di Casa Sonzogno” 1:154.
99. Quoted in Sheehy, Eleonora Duse, 32.
Duse’s acting made a great impression on Calvé and Bellincioni. Calvé, as part of her study of Carmen, is said to have spent time in Granada to study the customs, dances, and dresses of the gypsies, and Bellincioni, who created the role of Santuzza in *Cavalleria rusticana*, prided herself on having abandoned traditional performance practices: “And without fear, I distanced myself from every rancid tradition of the lyric stage, sincerely giving myself over to *recitare cantando* in a harmonious and complex whole that allowed me to weep sincerely, even in music, about the pain, so human, in Santuzza's soul.” Even Eduard Hanslick was impressed when he saw Bellincioni in Tasca’s *A Santa Lucia* and confirmed her unconventional acting:

With Bellincioni, it borders on the miraculous how word and gesture, sound and facial expression inseparably converge in most convincing truth, in most touching emotion. Not the slightest conventional gesture, everything [is] so natural and characteristic as if it could not be otherwise at all! And in this realistic truth, even in passionate affects, Bellincioni keeps things within measure and preserves a feeling of beauty.  

The new approach to vocal production seems to date back to a well-known interpreter of Carmen, Virginia Ferni-Germano, whose vocal “nervousness” impressed Nicola Daspuro, Edoardo Sonzogno’s representative for southern Italy, as early as 1885. The most significant early exponents of the new style, however, were once again Calvé and Bellincioni. While Calvé, according to Celletti, balanced soft attacks, transparent tone (“filature vaporose”), and impeccable legato of bel canto on the one hand with deliberate inequalities of color, harsh inflections, and screams on the other, Bellincioni often sacrificed beauty of tone and perfection of technique for constant nervous


103. Nicola Daspuro’s article on Ferni-Germano appeared in March 1885 in the *Teatro illustrato* and is quoted in Landini, “I grandi cantanti di Casa Sonzogno” 1:156.

excitement and immediate expression. Bellincioni quickly emerged as one of the most sought-after performers of the verismo repertoire and was imitated by a growing number of singers who abandoned technical purity when they felt the emotional charge of a particular passage required it. Even Francesco Tamagno, who had learned the part of Otello under Verdi’s supervision, included in his 1903/4 recording of Otello’s death scene some vocal hooks and gasps associated with the new style. Later interpreters of the role amplified the new approach by including abundant gasps and, in the case of Renato Zanelli’s 1928 interpretation, by launching the act 3 “Dio! mi potevi scagliar” in pure speech. These interpretations not only rank among the most acclaimed but strengthen the ties between Otello and verismo.

Sets, Costumes, and Lighting

While the sets and costumes of the 1890s did not by any means break with convention, they occasionally reflect an interest in the lifestyle of the poor and a greater degree of authenticity. In tandem with new types of operatic plots, “slums, alleys, shady porticos, village churches, shrines, [and] washing hung out to dry” replaced the “famous monuments that had featured in the earlier Risorgimental ‘tours of Italy.’” Italian productions had not exactly been emphasizing realism in their sets and costumes, and it is thus not surprising that Auguste Mariette, the driving force behind the creation of Aida, feared that an original production at La Scala would have led to unrealistic designs. Verdi, too, in an interview granted to L’Événement shortly after the first production of Aida at the Paris Opéra, complained that the “Italians sacrifice everything to the music” (“les Italiens sacrifient tout à la musique”). For


106. Favorite Verdi’s [sic] Singers, compact disc, Minerva MN-A12, 1995. See, for example, the hook to enhance the expression as Otello repeats Desdemona’s name or the word “morta.” At the same time, Tamagno still applies the portamento and messa di voce of the old school in numerous places.

107. Renato Zanelli: Complete Baritone Recordings & Selected Tenor Recordings, compact disc, Pearl 9028, 1993 (the excerpt is conducted by Sir John Barbirolli). Verdi’s instructions to Marianna Barbieri-Nini and Felice Varesi (to sing sotto voce, to put certain phrases in relief, or to stick more closely to speech than to singing) differ from the crude attacks (aspirates, hooks), bending of vowels, gasps, and sighs typical of verismo. See Michael Scott, The Record of Singing to 1914 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 103, 114; and J. B. Steane, The Grand Tradition: Seventy Years of Singing on Record, 2nd ed. (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1993), 168.


the Cairo premiere, Mariette went out of his way to ensure authenticity, and for the Milan premiere, the subsequently published *disposizione scenica* also emphasizes authenticity, at least in costumes, make-up, and jewelry. “The stage director will, under no circumstances and no pretext whatsoever, permit any artist, chorister, dancer, etc., etc., to make even the slightest changes in his or her costumes, wigs, and jewelry, which were scrupulously executed in accordance with the costume designs. These were studied with every possible care and executed by famous artists with scrupulous historic precision.”

Some fifteen years later, Boito betrayed a similar interest when, in a letter to Verdi, he instructed the costume designer for *Otello*, Alfredo Edel, “to study the Venetian painters of the last years of the fifteenth century and the entire first quarter of the sixteenth century.” Verdi, for his part, was more concerned with the dramatic effect than historical accuracy. Even though he supported historically informed staging, he originally suggested for *Otello* an Ethiopian (not a Venetian) look “without the usual turban” and enthusiastically embraced the suggestion by the painter Domenico Morelli that Jago wear a black costume as a symbol of his black soul.

Puccini insisted on a degree of realism unprecedented in Italian opera. In preparation for *Madama Butterfly*, for instance, he consulted photographic documents and a series of Japanese woodblock prints because he wanted to go beyond the clichés of nineteenth-century *japonisme*. Referring to the costumes of *La fanciulladel West* for the New York premiere, he commented on the difficulty of “distressing the costumes” and of making miners and women-folk look as if they had been “wearing those outfits for a long time”; for the Turin production he insisted “on the use of clay and various dyes in order to achieve the same outcome out of respect for environmental reality.”

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In 1883, La Scala installed an electric system, which, when used in conjunction with Edison’s newly invented incandescent lights, allowed for more realistic representation of sets, costumes, and mood than lighting with gas or even electric arc lamps had allowed.\textsuperscript{115} Influenced by David Belasco (who used electric lighting to reproduce “to the fullest extent . . . the true effects of nature” and make possible a “more perfect use of color”), Puccini drew heavily on light, whether to create a realistic effect, support his musical structure, or both.\textsuperscript{116} The most obvious example appears without doubt in the vigil from \textit{Madama Butterfly}, where through a gradual change of light—and supported by an off-stage humming chorus—Puccini convincingly bridges a time span from evening to morning in just a few minutes. And Helen Greenwald has shown that the contrast between sunset and night in act 1 of \textit{Manon Lescaut} parallels similar contrasts of action, tonality, and meter.\textsuperscript{117} The combination of all these visual aspects led some critics to perceive in the sets of \textit{Manon Lescaut} “a degree of pictorial verism.”\textsuperscript{118}

Despite the undeniable realism in some sets and costumes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, elements of idealism and convention did not disappear by any means, not even in Puccini. Viale Ferrero discovered, for instance, that Puccini, in an interview published in \textit{La stampa}, begins by promoting his interest in “environmental reality” and only a few lines later talks about his investing “a violent story . . . with ideality . . . in order to surround” those “episodes with a dreamlike atmosphere.”\textsuperscript{119} In addition, the urge to fill every space with \textit{something} (towers, balconies, drapes, or statues) suffocated any sense of reality that may otherwise have existed.\textsuperscript{120}


\textsuperscript{117} Greenwald, “Realism on the Opera Stage,” 286–87.


\textsuperscript{119} Interview given to \textit{La stampa}, 11 November 1911; quoted in Viale Ferrero, “Stage and Set,” 108.

Sociopolitical Aspects

The tendency to abandon convention is also apparent in the sociopolitical aspects of late nineteenth-century opera. The gradual preference for repertory works over new ones began in the 1840s and became the norm by the 1870s. It was fueled by the Italian unification, when municipalities began to withdraw the traditional subsidies, and by the need to appeal to the masses who, attracted by affordable tickets, began to frequent opera houses such the Pagliano in Florence (built in 1853), the Dal Verme in Milan (1864), and the Costanzi in Rome (1880). 121 This trend culminated in the 1892 stipulation that La Scala include two so-called popular performances, a series that was successfully launched with Catalani’s *La Wally*. 122 These changes created enormous problems for the impresarios, who by the 1870s had essentially lost control over the program and performers. Copyright laws had begun to strengthen the position of publishers as early as the 1840s, and the laws following Italian unification sealed the impresarios’ fate. Operas could no longer be performed without the owner’s—i.e., usually the publisher’s—permission, and both Ricordi and Sonzogno could grant or deny requests to rent scores at will, usually forcing an impresario to schedule entire seasons around the works available from their catalogs. 123 In 1875, Sonzogno assumed the role of impresario at the Milanese Teatro di Santa Radegonda (where he scheduled operettas and *opéras comiques* from his own catalog); in 1883, he was able to launch the competition that eventually led to the composition of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*; and in 1888, he took over the management of the Teatro Costanzi (where *Cavalleria rusticana* was first performed). Once again, the trend culminated in the 1890s, when Ricordi and Sonzogno alternated as impresarios of La Scala, controlling repertoire, casting, and production. 124 While the young Rossini owed part of his career to Domenico Barbaja and the young Verdi to Bartolomeo Merelli and Alessandro Lanari, the careers of Ponchielli, Catalani, Puccini, and Mascagni were launched by Ricordi or Sonzogno. 125

121. See John Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: The Role of the Impresario* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 170–73; and Fiamma Nicolodi, “Opera Production from Italian Unification to the Present,” in *The History of Italian Opera*, vol. 4, *Opera Production and Its Resources*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 167. Rosselli refers to the use of the term “repertory opera” in an 1845 letter of the soprano Fanny Tacchinardi Persiani to the impresario Carlo Balochino, indicating that she was to sing in “a repertory opera best suited to her and to the company”; in 1849, the term was in use at the Teatro Regio in Turin and in 1851 at the Naples royal theaters (p. 170).


Conclusion

The characteristics that in one way or another broke with conventions of Romantic melodramma combine to mark a significant shift in the 1860s are fully realized in the 1890s. Social, musical, and production-related aspects of opera have, of course, been in flux ever since the genre’s inception around 1600, and similar shifts occur in other periods of operatic history. But toward the end of the nineteenth century, a remarkable number of parameters changed significantly. Though they changed over the span of a few decades, they are all intertwined. At first, the pressure of revolutions and censorship hampered innovation, laying the foundation for repertory opera. With the political pressures reduced after unification, a greater number of composers were able to please broader audiences with new plots. New plots in turn called for a new dramaturgy, a new dramaturgy for new forms and language, a new language for new ideals of acting, new ideals of acting for new approaches to singing and staging. The results, though implemented gradually, form a conceptually coherent period of operatic composition, which we could with historical justification call “verismo” rather than “transition.” Verismo eliminated the established conventions (or, we might say, ideals of Romantic opera) and found its full realization in the works of the 1890s. Some operas are obviously more veristic than others, but a qualification of degree applies to any conceptually defined stylistic type (e.g., opera seria, reform opera in the second half of the eighteenth century, or Romantic opera, to name just a few). As I have stated earlier, it would be unrealistic to expect that we change established historical concepts, especially after having spent so much time and energy sorting out the various operatic trends in the second half of the nineteenth century. But if we come to accept verismo in the sense it was used at that time, we would be able to highlight a clearly defined process—the gradual departure from Romantic convention—and draw on a term we have had at our disposal for more than one hundred years.

126. One need only recall Verdi’s problems with such innovative librettos as Stiffelio, Rigoletto, and La traviata; not only did they have to be modified, but they would hardly have been accepted at all had a composer with less clout been the author.

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Verismo: Origin, Corruption, and Redemption of an Operatic Term

**Abstract**

Verismo, a term originally applied to nineteenth-century art and literature of various degrees of realism, has been the subject of controversy when applied to opera. While literary scholarship has come to measure verismo against the narrowly defined models provided by the theories, novels, and short stories of Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga, operatic scholarship has either superimposed these same theories on the dramatic genre of the libretto or it has constructed concepts of questionable historical foundation. Drawing mainly on a large corpus of neglected nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discussions of verismo, this article uncovers the original meanings of the term and outlines how we have come to adopt a view of verismo that is problematic in regard to both literature and opera. Contrary to this view, verismo was seen in the nineteenth century primarily as a reaction to the idealism and conventionality of earlier artworks; in this sense it had already been applied to opera before 1890, and it is, in fact, a perfectly appropriate designation for opera in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In comparison to Romantic Italian opera, with its conventional forms of both libretto and music, verismo opera reacts to idealism in any combination of categories ranging from plot to vocabulary, verse, harmony and melody, performance practice, and production.

Keywords: verismo, idealism, Italian opera, dramaturgy, Giuseppe Verdi