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GILBERT R. DAVIS

Verdi's Projected *Re Lear*: A Study of Frustration and Dramatic Genius

I - Introduction

Though but three of Verdi's twenty-five operas are based on Shakespearean plays — *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* — there is little doubt of his devotion to Shakespeare. Evidence of this worship abounds in Verdi's letters. Early in his career, he confessed preferring "Shakespeare to all other dramatists, including the Greeks."¹ In later years he wrote: "[Shakespeare] has been in my hands from my youth, and I constantly read and re-read him."² To Countess Maffei he expressed it this way: "It may be a good thing to copy reality; but to invent reality is much, much better. . . . These three words: 'to invent reality' may look like a contradiction, but ask Papa [i.e., Shakespeare]."³

Of Verdi's three Shakespearean operas, critics agree that *Macbeth*, an interesting and accomplished work, is less as opera than its original is as drama. On the other hand, almost everyone agrees that *Otello* and *Falstaff* are operas as great as their sources; and some argue that *Falstaff* vastly improves on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

But what can be said about Verdi's fourth Shakespearean opera, the proposed *Re Lear*? Would it have surpassed the earlier *Macbeth*? Would it have equalled *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, or *La Traviata*, operas Verdi composed during the years of planning *Re Lear*? Lacking the music, it is of course impossible to know. Yet, from the Maestro's six-year correspondence with his two librettists we can see not only his great frustration with one of them, but we can also piece together a picture of how *Re Lear* might have looked. These letters reveal Verdi's deep understanding of his beloved 'Papa' and of the operatic stage.

II - The Historical Background of *Re Lear*

The history of *Re Lear*, a curious and complicated one, reaches back to 1843, barely four years after Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*, was produced. At that time Verdi abandoned his brief flirtation with the idea for lack of an opera company capable of performing such an ambitious work. Three years later, when Benjamin Lumley requested

an opera for his London season, Verdi agreed to reconsider *Re Lear* because Her Majesty's Theatre could provide a bass (the celebrated Luigi Lablache) capable of singing Lear. But, as Lumley later recounted: "Verdi's health gave way. . . and the opera itself was not forthcoming."⁴

In 1856, Verdi returned to *Re Lear*, this time sending Salvatore Cammarano a detailed scenario of the proposed opera.⁵ Cammarano, an accomplished librettist, had collaborated with Verdi on *Alzira* (1845), *La Battaglia Di Legnano* (1849), *Luisa Miller* (1849), and would later write the libretto for *Il Trovatore* (1853). Verdi's draft of *Re Lear*, outlining a four-act opera of eleven scenes, is a surprisingly complete document, sensitive to the needs of the reduced drama. Further work on the libretto was delayed, and in July 1852 Cammarano's sudden death forced Verdi to set the project aside. The following year Verdi returned to *Re Lear*, this time with the poet and playwright Antonio Somma. By mid-1853 they were deeply involved, with the Maestro teaching the inexperienced Somma the rudiments of libretto writing. Verdi's letters are liberally sprinkled with polite corrections and deletions, and after three years of frustration on both sides, the collaboration produced a libretto, perhaps even a score.

Re Lear was offered to the Naples San Carlo for the 1857-58 season, provided the management engaged the right singers. At this stage in his career, Verdi was a stern taskmaster, demanding high standards of performers. For the San Carlo premiere he specified Marietta Piccolomini (who had triumphed as Violetta) for Cordelia, and Giuseppina Brambilla (a contralto of considerable fame) as the Fool. Protracted negotiations ended in cancellation, and the evidence suggests Verdi meant them to.⁶ All indications point to his unwillingness to set Somma's libretto to music.

After 1858, *Re Lear* resurfaced twice more: once for the 1863 Paris Opera season, and much later when Verdi and Arrigo Boito began their celebrated collaboration. Thus, though *King Lear* was Verdi's first flirtation with his beloved Shakespeare, twenty years of off and on work produced no opera. If Verdi composed any music for *Re Lear*, it was either destroyed, according to his final instructions for all his unpublished music, or (more likely) found its way into other operas, as the opportunities arose.

III - The Somma Collaboration

Of the two libretto projects, Somma's completed version is of interest mainly for its incredible (even for opera!) mangling of the original. In his initial correspondence, Verdi briefly summarized the *Lear* plot, instructing Somma to "do what — in your judgement — seems right to you. Only keep your eye on the need for absolute brevity."⁷ In the letters that followed, Verdi presented a textbook of libretto writing, instructing

the inexperienced Somma in all aspects of the operatic stage. But in the end Verdi got — in place of “absolute brevity” — a sprawling, confused, and confusing libretto.

Cutting and rearranging, Somma eliminated Edgar and Gloucester, introducing in their place a new character, “the Hermit.” (One can imagine Verdi’s enthusiasm for this little alteration, since hermits usually appear in opera to unravel those knotty plots that artless librettists create through their cutting and rearranging!) In addition, Somma left Edmund’s death in the final act unresolved. But when he suggested a ballet and chorus to resolve some of the problems the trimming had caused, Verdi had had enough. His April 7, 1856 letter to Somma sums up the distress:

I’m not sure the fourth act of “King Lear” is good in the form in which you just sent it to me, but I know that you can’t impose so many recitatives one after another on the audience, especially in the fourth act. I would be willing to set even a newspaper or a letter to music, but in the theater the public will stand for anything except boredom. . . [Act IV] certainly lacks brevity, perhaps clarity, perhaps truth.

Clearly Somma was over his head. The libretto had lost its focus: it was no longer Shakespeare. Indeed, it was a giant step back from the outline Verdi had proposed to Cammarano six years earlier.

IV - The Cammarano Collaboration

That outline — 125 lines long — reduced Shakespeare’s sprawling original (twenty-six scenes in five acts) to eleven scenes in four acts. From the outset Verdi knew they were dealing with something unusual and he urged Cammarano to approach *Re Lear* freed from the previous operatic conventions:

You understand that there is no need to turn *Re Lear* into the kind of drama we have thus far been accustomed to; but let us treat it in a completely new way, on a grand scale, without regard for conventions.⁸

Exactly what he had in mind Verdi didn’t make clear. Perhaps, as he later confessed, it was his difficulty with Shakespeare’s “changing scenes all the time,” the effect of which “was like watching a magic lantern.”⁹ The finished outline, however, reflects no difficulty of this kind; indeed, this amazing summary shows Verdi’s keen understanding of both *King Lear* and the operatic stage.

For *Re Lear* Verdi planned principal roles for Lear, Cordelia, Edmund, Edgar, and the Fool; secondary ones for Regan, Goneril, Kent, and Gloucester. He also planned for the usual chorus and supernumeraries. In general, the casting reflects the usual resources of mid-nineteenth century opera houses; but Verdi’s placing the Fool among

the principals, to be sung by a woman, was a bold stroke, emphasizing the importance the Fool had for him.

In the outline, Act I includes three scenes: the first — set in the “Great Stateroom of Lear’s Palace” — covers the division of the kingdom, Kent’s banishment, and “Cordelia’s farewell.” The next scene shifts to Gloucester’s castle where Edmund delivers his famed soliloquy, “Thou, Nature, art my goddess.” From here, Verdi compresses Shakespeare’s I.ii and II.i and closes the scene with “Edgar flees, after attempting with pitiful words to sooth” his father’s anger. The next scene follows Shakespeare, but omits Kent in the stocks. The first act closes, in Verdi’s words:

Lear, realizing his daughters’ heartlessness, cries, “You think I’ll weep; no, I’ll not weep.” Swearing vengeance he exclaims that he will do terrible things, “What they are yet,” he knows not, “but they shall be the terrors of the earth.” (The noise of a tempest begins to be heard). The curtain falls.

Though Verdi provided no musical details, the ordering of events and stage directions suggest a closing trio of Lear, the Fool, and Kent, supported by the secondary characters and chorus. Lear’s being turned out in the storm provides a powerful Act I curtain, indeed.

The second act opens in the midst of the storm, continuing the action of Act I. Verdi fuses the original scenes i, ii, and iv of Act III into a scene of Lear’s growing madness. Edgar has now joined the wayward trio. Verdi, taken by the prospects of a mad Lear and the dishevelled Edgar, projects a “magnificent quartet” built around Lear’s “What, have his daughters brought him to this pass?/Could’st thou save nothing? Would’st thou give’em all?” The scene closes with Gloucester’s arrival in search of Lear.

The next two scenes develop around Edmund’s plotting with the sisters, the planned blinding of Gloucester, and the impending battle with France. Verdi’s outline sketches the first scene only superficially, but the second returns *Re Lear* to high drama. Here Verdi plans Edmund’s aria “To both sisters have I sworn my love,” and a duet with Goneril over her token of love. For this scene Verdi reaches over to Shakespeare’s Acts IV and V, rearranging and compressing the sprawling subplot to give it operatic coherence and force.

The final scene of Act II returns to the now delirious Lear, who wishes to set up a court of justice to try his faithless daughters. Lear, growing progressively mad, finally falls asleep. Verdi describes this as an “extremely bizarre and moving scene,” and may have had this in mind when he cautioned Cammarano not to be bound by conventional operatic verses. But for the outline, the Maestro temporizes with a conventional chorus of peasants to accompany Lear, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool. Perhaps

when he came to writing this second act close, Verdi would have followed his own advice — “to treat it in a new way. . . without regard for conventions” — and left the four principals to their “bizarre and moving” quartet, without those gratuitous peasants.

Verdi’s third act focuses on Lear and Cordelia, its two scenes taken from the late portions of Shakespeare’s Act IV. The first shows Cordelia’s great sorrow over her father’s fate. Verdi outlines it thusly: “Cordelia, wild with joy, thanks heaven and yearns for the moment of vengeance.” The second scene brings Lear and Cordelia together in a “Tent in the French Camp.” In Verdi’s summary, the scene opens with “Lear asleep on a bed.” After a brief exchange between Cordelia and the doctor, “Lear awakens. Magnificent duet, as in Shakespeare’s scene. The curtain falls.” And what a curtain that would have been!

Of Act IV’s two scenes, the first opens on Edgar leading the blind Gloucester, who laments the unjust treatment from his son. Shortly we learn of France’s defeat and the capture of Lear and Cordelia. The victorious forces appear on stage to the tune of a “March.” Suddenly the armed Edgar appears, “with visor lowered” and accuses Edmund of high treason; Edgar reveals the incriminating letter. They duel and Edmund is mortally wounded. Before he dies he confesses all and urges Edgar hurry to save Cordelia and Lear.

The final action, which Verdi characterizes as “a moving scene between Lear and Cordelia” is set in prison. Here “Cordelia begins to feel the effects of the poison.” Albany, Kent, and Edgar are too late to save her, and “Lear, paying no attention to their arrival, takes up Cordelia’s corpse and exclaims: ‘She’s dead as earth. Howl! Howl! etc.’ Ensemble finale with Lear having the leading part. End.” That is how Verdi finished his proposed *Re Lear*. Noticeably absent in this conclusion is the carnage that bedecks Shakespeare’s stage. Verdi wanted no excess of corpses to blur the image, insisting the final tableau focus of the angelic Cordelia and the broken Lear. This dramatic intention led him to alter Cordelia’s death to poisoning, which allowed for the final scene between father and daughter, showing “her agony and death.” Throughout his planning for *Re Lear*, Verdi maintained a consistent image for Cordelia. As he later instructed Somma, “I won’t have Cordelia appear in armor, but rather, as throughout the drama, as a woman and angel.”¹⁰

As the summary for Cammarano clearly shows, Verdi’s original *Re Lear* plans were eminently workable. From an otherwise complex original — perhaps Shakespeare’s most complicated tragedy — Verdi produced a dramatically effective outline for a libretto. The result of his compression and rearrangement was a concentrated, yet coherent libretto, one with the power of the original. All that remained was for the librettist to supply the verses, which would be turned into music “on a grand scale.” That Cam-

marano's untimely death and Somma's inexperience deprived Verdi — and ultimately us — of his *Re Lear* is lamentable, indeed.

¹ Letter to Antonio Somma, April 22, 1853, as quoted in Franz Werfel and Paul Stefan (eds.) *Verdi; The Man in His Letters*, translated by Edward Downs (New York: Fischer Publishing Co., 1942), p. 175. All further references to Verdi's letters to Somma are from this text.

² Letter to Leon Escudier, April 28, 1865, in *Carteggi Verdiani*, edited by Alessandro Luzio (Roma: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1935). References to Verdi's letters to Escudier, Maffei, and Cammarano are my translations from this text.

³ October 20, 1876.

⁴ Benjamin Lumley, *Reminiscences of the Opera* (London, 1864), pp. 142-143, as quoted in Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Verdi* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 77.

⁵ February 28, 1850.

⁶ For a full discussion of this episode, see Vincent Godfroy, *The Dramatic Genius of Verdi* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1977), II, 339-342 and Osborne, pp. 80-81.

⁷ May 22, 1853.

⁸ The entire outline is presented in this important letter of February 28, 1850.

⁹ Letter to Somma, June 29, 1853.

¹⁰ January 8, 1855.