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Mercadante in Paris (1835-36): The Critical View

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On 1 February 1842, the opening paragraph of the music column of the *Revue des deux mondes* read as follows:

Il y a en ce moment, en Italie, une école qui tend à se rapprocher du système lyrique français. On a tant répété aux Italiens que leurs roulades n'avaient pas le sens commun, et que leurs éternelles cavatines étaient absurdes, que les Italiens ne veulent plus faire de roulades et renoncent aux cavatines. À la tête de ce mouvement, qui s'évertue à tenir plus de compte de l'action et des paroles, à s'inspirer davantage du sujet et de la couleur, à fonder entre la musique et le texte une harmonie plus immédiate, à la tête de ce mouvement se place aujourd'hui Mercadante.¹

The article, by Ange-Henri Blaze (known as Blaze de Bury), is a review of the Parisian performance of Saverio Mercadante's *La vestale*, premiered at la Scala in Milan in 1840 and performed in Paris most likely in late January 1842. It represents a sample of the reception of Mercadante (1795-1870) in France in the 1840s and signals a strong connection between the composer's stylistic quest and the French kinship of the operas he composed between the late 1830s and the early 40s. French critics of that period recognized that connection on many occasions in their discussions of Mercadante's operas that came to be labelled as those of his 'reform' period.² Acknowledged as the Italian composer who best reflected the dramatic sensibility of the 'French operatic system', through adherence of music to action, Mercadante was here praised for his effort to build a less languid phrase and a more effective relationship between 'sentiment and action, voice and orchestra'.

The current article takes this 1842 Blaze statement as a point of departure to shed new light onto Mercadante's early French connections, concentrating in particular on his Parisian sojourn of 1835-36. Drawing on primary sources such as Mercadante's

¹ ***, "Revue musicale", *Revue des deux mondes*, 1 February 1842, p. 469. The reference to this review is in M. WITTMANN, "Meyerbeer and Mercadante? The Reception of Meyerbeer in Italy", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, V (1993), p. 115-132, from which this study stems.

² The definition refers to operas that Mercadante composed between the late 1830s and early 1840s, where a new stylistic trend is evident. Traditional scholarship considers *Il giuramento* (1837) the first tangible example of this new 'period', which includes works such as *Il bravo* (1839), *La vestale* (1840), *Il reggente* (1843). Other studies recognize the appearance of this new dramatic language in works such as *I Normanni a Parigi* (1832). On the debate about the operas of Mercadante's mature style, see in particular the brilliant syntheses offered by K. M. BRYAN, *An Experiment in Form: The Reform Operas of Saverio Mercadante (1795-1870)*, PhD Dissertation (Indiana University, 1994) and R. KOWALS, *Issues of Style in Saverio Mercadante's Mature Operas*, PhD Dissertation (Brandeis University, 1997).

letters and the French press, I present a detailed account of the composer's activity before and during his six-month-stay in Paris focusing in particular on the reception of *I briganti*, composed for the Théâtre-Italien and premiered on 22 March 1836. First, I will establish a chronology based on information contained in Mercadante's letters and events recorded in the press. Secondly, I will discuss samples from a *dossier de presse* on *I briganti*, devoting particular attention to the response of the press to the premiere.³ All information presented add detail on the reception of Mercadante's work in relation to French music criticism, and paves the way for future studies of *I briganti* and its position in the composer's stylistic development.

The road to Paris

According to Mercadante's letters, following an invitation from the Théâtre-Italien to write an opera, the composer made arrangements to travel from Novara, where he was *maestro di cappella* of the cathedral, to Paris late in October 1835.⁴ The composition of the opera was planned for the end of the month, its rehearsal and premiere for November, and his return to Novara in December, just in time for Christmas. At the same time, the composer was dealing with the *impresa* of the Teatro S. Carlo in Naples to stage in September, just a few weeks prior his departure to Paris, another opera newly written. In his letters from this period, far from showing excessive excitement about his upcoming Parisian undertaking, Mercadante shared with Francesco Florimo his need to leave the provincial atmosphere of Novara: "ed io farò il possibile onde scuotermi [...] in questa città di Provincia, dove non si parla che di Riso, frumento, vino, Gran-Turco, e cet."⁵ and welcomed the opportunity offered by both the Neapolitan *impresa* and Rossini.

As a subsequent letter to Felice Romani indicates, the subject that Rossini first suggested for the Théâtre-Italien was based on Giovanni Battista Casti's *Re Teodoro*.⁶ Mercadante, however, considered it unsuitable for the Parisian stage: the plot was overcrowded and ended coldly; moreover, in his opinion the part for the bass did not do justice to Luigi Lablache, as had been expressly required by the French *impresa*. The alternatives proposed by the Parisian impresarios Édouard Robert and Carlo Severini in order to give Luigi Lablache's role more visibility did not convince Mercadante either.⁷ The composer intended to give equal weight to all four major performers,

³ See WITTMANN, "Meyerbeer and Mercadante?", p. 115-132.

⁴ Mentions to the earliest negotiations with the Parisian impresarios are included in two letters in Mercadante's epistolary, dating respectively 14th and 19th of July 1835. In particular, the second one also carries the evidence of Rossini's direct involvement in the decision of the libretto to set to music. S. PALERMO, *Saverio Mercadante: Biografia-Epistolario* (Fasano, 1985) n. 44 and 45, p. 141-142.

⁵ PALERMO, *Biografia-Epistolario*, n. 44, p. 141 : letter to Francesco Florimo, 10 July 1835. From this point on, all letters quoted from Palermo's *Epistolario* will be abbreviated with recipient name, date, and letter and page number in the *Epistolario*.

⁶ Letter to Felice Romani, 19 July 1835, n. 46, p. 144-146.

⁷ On the 'alternatives' proposed by the French *impresa*, see abovementioned letter to F. Romani, n. 46, p. 144-146. In particular, the subjects proposed by Severini in order to have Lablache shining were Goldoni's *Il burbero benefico* and Giraud's *Il disperato per eccesso di buon cuore*.

Giulia Grisi, Giovanni Battista Rubini, Antonio Tamburini, and Luigi Lablache (the extraordinary ‘quartet’ of singers who had recently created the main roles in Vincenzo Bellini’s *I puritani*), so as not to fuel any form of rivalry. He concluded as follows:

Ti fo osservare che se tu mi ritardassi la poesia io sarei rovinato e per sempre. Devo andare in scena immancabilmente per la fine di gennaio; dovendo io trovarmi il primo, non si può dilazionare quest’epoca, poichè in marzo la compagnia parte per Londra. Il mio amor proprio esige ch’io me ne occupi seriamente, e perciò è necessario aver tempo. Con la citata compagnia e il libro di Romani, nessuna scusa vi è per me se non riesco, ed invece di migliorare la mia fortuna sarei bersaglio de’ giornali, e dovrei per sempre dare un addio al Teatro. [...] La mia sorte è nelle tue mani, non deludere, per carità, le mie speranze.⁸

This letter represents not only an eloquent document of Mercadante’s hope to achieve good success as the time for his Parisian mission was approaching and of his apprehension in dealing with a potentially unreliable collaborator, but also a veritable prediction of misadventures to follow.

Later in the summer, cholera began to blight Northern Italy. Mercadante’s attempts to approach the Kingdom of Naples, first via Genoa, then by land from Milan, were thwarted by quarantine which extended to all residents of Savoy. Stranded in the Kingdom of Sardinia with his family, Mercadante rapidly changed his plans, renouncing his commitments with Naples.⁹ First he spent some time in Arona, a small rural town in the province of Novara, then he travelled to France earlier than he had originally intended, presumably in late August. The French press reported the news of a meeting in Genoa between Mercadante and Niccolò Paganini on 1 September, which contradicted the widespread rumours that the great violinist had died of cholera:

Les espérances que nous avons exprimées dans notre dernier numéro, de voir bientôt démentir la nouvelle de la mort de Paganini, se trouvent heureusement changées en une complète certitude. Malgré les détails officiels de sa fin et de ses funérailles, données [*sic*] récemment par un journal, Paganini vit, et se porte à merveille. Le célèbre compositeur Mercadante, en se rendant à Paris, l’a vu et lui a parlé à Novarre le 1^{er} septembre. Paganini arrivant de Gênes, avait subi une quarantaine de trois jours, et allait se remettre en route pour Parme. Nous apprenons en outre qu’il a donné le 9 un grand concert à Milan, où il est encore en ce moment.¹⁰

On his way to Paris, Mercadante met in Milan also the impresarios of the Théâtre-Italien to receive further instructions on the upcoming opera, which he rapidly communicated to Romani.¹¹ The work had to be comic but clearly differentiated from the other pieces on the bill for the same season, it was to make the interpreters shine equally, and it was to contain a *Duetto a due Bassi*, another duetto between the Prima Donna and the tenor, three solos for Rubini, Grisi, Tamburini, and a Chorus

⁸ Letter to Felice Romani, 19 July 1835, n. 46, p. 144.

⁹ In a letter to Domenico Barbaja, Mercadante explains the reasons of his withdrawing from his commitments with Naples, describing his misadventures with the issued quarantine. Letter to Domenico Barbaja, 7 September 1835, n. 48, p. 147-148.

¹⁰ “Nouvelles”, *Gazette musicale de Paris*, 20 September 1835, p. 310.

¹¹ Letter to Felice Romani, 2 September 1835, n. 49, p. 148-150.

both of men and women. Finally it was to last no more than two hours and a half. On 2 September, in his last letter to Romani from Italian soil, Mercadante provided the poet with a calendar of deadlines, which he summed up in a post-scriptum: “Fa di tutto per spedirmi il primo atto per la fine del corrente ed in 8bre verso la fine il 2° acciò possa andare in scena per tutto 9bre. Scrivimi subito la tua decisione intorno all’argomento.”¹²

The Parisian Sojourn

Mercadante summarized the main stages of his voyage to Paris in a lively letter recording his arrival on 13 September 1835: “Il nostro arrivo in questa capitale ebbe luogo soltanto il giorno 13 corr. avendo fatti due riposi, in Ginevra ed Dijòn [sic], per poter nuovamente dare moto alle gambe divenute acciughe salate, in quella benedetta diligenza [...]”.¹³ The French press also devoted considerable attention to his arrival and his upcoming opera for the Théâtre-Italien. The main newspapers broke the news as early as 12 September, refreshing the readers’ memories about the main reason why Mercadante should have been familiar to the French audience. As Rossini had expected, Mercadante was remembered by the Parisian press mainly as the composer of the *melodramma semiserio Elisa e Claudio*, which was known to the Parisian audience since 1823.¹⁴ The name of Mercadante soon began to appear in the announcements of the 1835-36 season of the Théâtre-Italien, for which the composer was said to be writing an *opéra bouffe* to a libretto by Romani “espressamente scritto par Parigi”.¹⁵

Very little is known about Mercadante’s early weeks in the French capital. The *Journal de Paris* signals his presence at a concert at the Gymnase musical later in September,¹⁶ but it is reasonable to assume that this was not the only musical event he attended. This assumption is reinforced by the growing awareness of the type of audience Mercadante had to satisfy, which emerges from his unanswered letters to Romani. In particular the composer drew attention to some aspects of Parisian musical taste: “Qui piacciono sommamente le cose delicate, cioè Romanze, Canzoncine, bei Canti ecc. La musica troppo *parlante* si perde e non l’intendono. Bei *Cori*, qualche bel pezzo *concertato*, non molti.”¹⁷

¹² *Id.*, p. 150.

¹³ Letter to Giuseppe Savio, Paris, 17 September 1835 (Novara, Archivio Storico, Collezione Giannoni), published in G. N. VETRO, “Saverio Mercadante Maestro di Cappella in Novara”, *Saggi su Saverio Mercadante*, ed. by G. PETRUCCI and G. MORAMARCO (Cassano delle Murge, 1992) p. 157-158.

¹⁴ *Elisa e Claudio* was based on a libretto by Luigi Romanelli and premiered at the Théâtre-Italien on 22 November 1823, featuring Giuditta Pasta in the title role. The opera received good acclaim, and part of its music served as material for Luc Guenée’s pastiche *Les Noces de Gamache*, based on Dupin’s and Sauvage’s text, premiered at the Odéon 9 May 1826.

¹⁵ In Italian in the text, as reported in *Gazette musicale de Paris* (13 September 1835), *Le Charivari* (22 September 1835), *Journal de Paris* (27 September 1835), just to quote some of the consulted sources.

¹⁶ A. DUSCHESNE (?), “Nouvelles des Théâtres et des Arts”, *Journal de Paris*, 27 September 1835, p. 3.

¹⁷ Letter to Felice Romani, 29 September 1835, n. 51, p. 152.

Mercadante's main purpose in communicating his impressions to Romani was certainly to obtain from him poetry suitable for the Parisian milieu. On 3 October, the same day he sent his friend and future biographer Florimo his famous account of Bellini's funeral, Mercadante also wrote a further letter to remind the unresponsive Romani of the agreements established with the French *impresa*.¹⁸

The composer's letters from this period also reveal that at some point Romani had suggested a subject for the libretto for Paris, derived from Goethe's *Torquato Tasso* and perhaps drawing on the play by Giovanni Rosini which had served as the basis for Jacopo Ferretti's libretto for Donizetti (1833). The letters from Mercadante to Romani throughout October suddenly show a more purposeful attitude and are packed with references to monetary compensation, a visible attempt to keep the librettist's focus alive.¹⁹ Furthermore, in those letters the composer continued to provide Romani with instructions for tailoring the principal roles in the opera and commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the singers:

Non dimenticare un poco di argomento, le note per le *Decorazioni, Vestiario*, ecc. Vi è un poco di gelosia fra Lablache e Tamburini, ti prego di equilibrare le parti il più che ti è possibile. Il primo è grand'attore e canta ancora bene, è insuperabile ne' pezzi concertati per la sua *anima, forza, sicurezza*. Il secondo canta delicato, e *La Straniera* è sempre il suo centro. Rubini è un angelo. La Grisi canta benissimo di somma espressione; sta bene assai in scena, è infaticabile. Bella, bellissima. Pezzi corti. Molto canto. Evitare i *parlanti*, poiché qui non l'intendono. Romani... Romani... tu riderai come un matto in leggere queste stravaganti lettere, ed io ti concedo di ridere sin che vuoi, ma ti scongiuro di occuparti di me e di non farmi perdere questa bella occasione di farmi onore. Addio.²⁰

Mercadante's optimism did not last long, though, as Romani stopped replying again from the beginning of November. The press remained silent about the composer's activity for some time, but acknowledged that plans had changed. On 23 October the *Gazette musicale de Paris* gave a cautious update:

Le Théâtre-Italien garde mystérieusement le silence sur le titre de l'opéra que lui prépare Mercadante, tout ce que nous *devons* dire c'est que l'ouvrage est du genre *semi serio*, et que l'on y verra briller dans une heureuse conjonction les quatre astres de la musique ultramontaine. Le rôle de Lablache sera comique, et probablement fera contraste avec la couleur dramatique du personnage de Tamburini.²¹

Only a week after the *Gazette's* update, Mercadante wrote desperate lines to Romani:

Tutta Parigi suppone ch'io sto ponendo in musica il tuo nuovo Drama, i giornali ne parlano continuamente, mentr'io mi rodo, smanio, fremo senza il minimo conforto. Cosa ti sarebbe costato di tranquillizzarmi con due parole? Dal momento che avevi fissato il *Torquato Tasso*, non ti era difficile tracciare un argomento, farmi avere almeno l'introduzione [...]²²

¹⁸ Letter to Felice Romani, 3 October 1835, n. 53, p. 155.

¹⁹ See above-mentioned letter to F. Romani, 19 October 1835, n. 54, p. 155-156.

²⁰ *Id.*, p. 156.

²¹ "Nouvelles", *Gazette musicale de Paris*, 23 October 1835, p. 352.

²² Letter to Felice Romani, 31 October 1835, n. 55, p. 157.

In a letter of 9 November, Mercadante plantively reminded Romani of a promise he had made on 31 October to provide him with some numbers for the new opera on 2 November: “Amico caris.mo, Con la tua del 31, mi promettesti qualche pezzo che avresti spedito il lunedì 2 corr. ma sinora nulla ho ricevuto.”²³ And on the same day, in a letter to his friend Carlo Lombardi in Novara, Mercadante expressed his deep concern for Romani’s delay but also his confidence that the poet would not abandon him.

Amico Caris.mo

Sempre speranze e mai Poesia – Ogni corriere che passa senza nulla ricevere è una vera morte per me.

Sono più che certo che Romani non vorrà abbandonarmi in questa importante situazione della mia carriera, ma pure ci vuole il tempo per fare della musica meno indegna che sia possibile, de’ suoi divini versi [...] Insomma io non ho più testa, e credo di diventar matto se egli non mi toglie di pene col spedirmi il tanto bramato Libretto.

[...] io sono ozioso, il pubblico attende grandi cose da me, i Giornali continuamente mi tormentono, ed in conseguenza, dalla mattina alla sera penso sempre al Torquato Tasso.²⁴

In many subsequent letters, Mercadante lamented that the leave obtained from Novara cathedral was coming to an end; he was worried about losing his post, as the requests from the chapel were becoming increasingly pressing. This growing concern, however, ran parallel to a seemingly constant trust of Romani.

In his letters Mercadante reveals himself anguished, in forced idleness, hunted and persecuted by the French press. The autumn was almost over, and by 19 December the press disclosed that the composer was going to resort to a new Italian poet “currently in Paris”, whose name they did not know.²⁵ On 24 January, in a letter to his friend and colleague in Novara, Giuseppe Savio, Mercadante reported the unofficial story:

Romani consumò un mero tradimento, non curando ciò che aveva promesso per scritto e ripetuto in varie sue lettere datate fino al 24 scorso dicembre. Rossini che mi ama prese a proteggermi e commosso dagli immensi danni causatimi dal sempre per me fatale Romani, scrisse direttamente a Torino intimando che se per volta di corriere non mandava l’intero libretto, si sarebbe protestato e provveduto un altro Poeta. In risposta, avessimo una fede con la quale dichiarava che aveva mal di testa e che non poteva fare i versi, senza darsi carico de’ quattro mesi che mi aveva fatto inutilmente perdere in questa città, e cagionandomi la spesa di seimila franchi. Quest’ultima lezione mi ha veramente scosso dal mio letargo, e mi fa da oggi in avanti considerare quest’uomo come *morto*, acciò non mi venga mai e poi mai e poi mai voglia di farmi comporre un altro libretto. Si ricorse ad un gentiluomo veneziano, amico di Rossini il quale d’accordo con noi si è subito adoprato per riparare nel miglior modo possibile a tanta rovina, atteso che s’io non do l’opera in questa stagione, non prendo un soldo e sarò lo zimbello di tutti i giornali i quali fanno festa quando possono dare addosso ad un italiano...²⁶

²³ Letter to Felice Romani, 9 November 1835, n. 57, p. 158-159.

²⁴ Letter to Carlo Lombardi, 9 November 1835, n. 56, p. 157-158.

²⁵ The news was reported on 19 December by *Journal de Paris* and *Le Temps*, on 27 December by *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*.

²⁶ Letter to Giuseppe Savio, Paris, 24 January 1836 (Novara, Archivio Storico, Collezione Giannoni), published in VETRO, “Saverio Mercadante”, p. 159.

Besides testifying to the friendly relationship between the two composers, Rossini's personal intervention shows the seriousness of the situation.

Also on 24 January 1836, the *Revue et Gazette musicale* first named the exiled poet Jacopo Crescini as the new librettist for Mercadante's opera.²⁷ The young poet, almost a parvenu, had been mentioned on 12 December in the *Journal de Paris* as the possible author of an *ode to Bellini*.²⁸ The press also presented a short discussion of the subject of the libretto and its suitability for the featured cast. The libretto for the new opera was based on *Die Räuber* by Schiller, already known to the Parisian audience through the French version in five acts by Lamartellière entitled *Robert, chef des brigands*. "Le poème est une imitation de la tragédie des *Brigands* de Schiller, ou plutôt du mélodrame de *Robert, chef des brigands*. Mais l'action et les caractères primitifs ont été singulièrement modifiés par le travail de M. Jacques Crescini."²⁹ More than a decade later, *Die Räuber* served as the literary source for Giuseppe Verdi's *I masnadieri* (1847).

The Critical View

By the end of January 1836 the Parisian press recorded the beginning of the stage rehearsals for *I briganti*, and disclosed that Mercadante was writing in haste, not having composed a single note before the end of December. Despite displaying a good deal of cynicism, the press seemed to sympathise unanimously with the Italian composer and his countless misfortunes, and treated him with great respect and dignity. By the end of February, in a letter to Luigi Camoletti in Novara, Mercadante gave an account of the new opera's progress:

Per la malattia della Grisi (che ora è quasi cessata) si dovettero sospendere le prove della mia Opera, e fare quelle del *Don Giovanni* di Mozart, onde piegare il servizio, e questa circostanza ritarderà di qualche giorno l'andata in scena. Io ho quasi terminato poichè mi manca solo l'Aria della d. *Grisi*, che attendo comporla quando sarà perfettamente guarita ed in attività onde procurare di contentarla. Ho instrumentato i due primi Atti ed ora mi occupo del terzo. Si hanno dovuti fare de' cambiamenti nel Libretto attesa la poca esperienza del Teatro che ha il Poeta, e si è rimediato alla meglio alle più grandi incoerenze. La Musica sembra contentare i cantanti quali nelle otto prove già fatte hanno dimostrato zelo e persuasione.³⁰

²⁷ "Nouvelles", *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 24 January 1836, p. 31-32. See also *Courrier des théâtres*, 27 January 1836 and *Journal des femmes*, 29 January 1836.

²⁸ Jacopo Crescini was a Venetian lawyer who lived in Paris and gravitated around the circle of Italian intellectuals in exile. Although he is mainly known for being Mercadante's librettist in this occasion, he also wrote with Count Pepoli the romanza n. 12, "La caccia", of Mercadante's *Serate Italiane* (Paris, 1836), a collection of 8 *ariette* and 4 *duetti* which mirrors Rossini's *Serate musicali* (Paris, 1836). For a comparison between the two collections, see M. A. SMART, "Parlor Games: Italian Music and Italian Politics in the Parisian Salon", *19th-Century Music*, XXXIV (2010), p. 39-60.

²⁹ Ch. MERRUAU, "Le Théâtre Italien", *Le Temps*, 9 April 1836, p. 2. For similar references to La Martellière's work, see also *i. e.*: *Le Charivari*, 24 March 1836; *La Quotidienne*, 25 March 1836; *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 27 March 1836.

³⁰ Letter to Luigi Camoletti, Paris, 26 February 1836, n. 59, p. 161-163.

And in March, during the days leading up to the premiere, the *Courrier des théâtres* followed the rehearsals of the opera with excitement, its epic prose lavishing great admiration on the composer:

Le drame de Schiller, tant de fois mis à la scène, sans faire oublier l'incomplète traduction de Lamartellière, *Robert chef des brigands*, va reparaître sous la forme italienne. Les Bouffes, qui savent déjà le premier acte, répétons cette pièce samedi prochain. La musique est l'ouvrage de M. Mercadante, compositeur célèbre que Paris dramatique ne connaît que par *Elisa e Claudio*, mais dont les œuvres sont partout où l'on aime les talents de premier ordre. On parle déjà du final du premier acte comme d'un morceau magnifique. Le succès qui attend celle-ci manque seul à la gloire de M. Mercadante, l'un des hommes les plus admirés pour son génie et les plus estimés pour ses vertus. Il appartient à notre capitale de poser la dernière fleur sur cette couronne.³¹

The journal also lamented that *I briganti* was destined to enjoy only a short-lived success, since the troupe of the Théâtre-Italien was approaching the end of the season and preparing to leave for London, much to the disappointment of Mercadante, who after so much trouble would not see his work fully recognised: "N'ayant plus que cinq Soirées à donner, les Bouffes les consacreront sans doute aux *Briganti*, de M. Mercadante. Beaucoup attendre et peu recevoir. Histoire universelle."³² Indeed, according to the press, *I briganti* only had four performances. On top of misfortune, of the five performances initially planned, the third, on 26 March, was cancelled because of Grisi's indisposition, and substituted with an act each of *Barbier* and *La prova*. In order to avoid the disappointment of the habituées, the performance was rescheduled for 30 March.

Overall, the critics acknowledged a success across the board, providing a detailed account of the work.³³ All reviews in the Parisian press follow a similar pattern: they open with an introduction to the composer and his previous works, especially emphasising the operatic repertoire known to the French audience, continue with a synopsis of the plot, and a thorough observation and critique of the libretto, the score and the performance of the new opera. For example, the *Courrier français* discussed some of Mercadante's recent successes extensively, drawing significant connections with Rossini, in this circumstance defined as "the sun", and the new production:

Homme de talent, il entra franchement dans la voie frayée par l'homme de génie : comme ses contemporains, les Pacini, les Vaccai, les Donizetti et bien d'autres, il gravita autour du soleil et s'éclaira du reflet de ses rayons. De tous les ouvrages composés par lui, et la liste en est longue, on ne connaît à Paris qu'*Elisa e Claudio*, joué avec quelque succès, sans toutefois s'être maintenu au répertoire ; mais il en est resté un beau duo de ténor et de basse qui a joui d'une popularité immense dans les concerts et les salons.³⁴

³¹ "Nouvelles de Paris", *Courrier des théâtres*, 14 March 1835, p. 4.

³² "Nouvelles de Paris", *Courrier des théâtres*, 21 March 1836, p. 4.

³³ Castil-Blaze's review of *I briganti*, appeared in *Revue de Paris* (tome XXVII, p. 254-259) on 27 March 1836, does not feature in this article for reasons of space. A larger discussion about this review is contained in F. PLANICA, *Saverio Mercadante and France (1823-1843)* (PhD Dissertation, University of Southampton, 2012).

³⁴ É. MONNAIS, "Théâtre Italien", *Courrier français*, 26 March 1836, p. 1.

The *Courrier des théâtres* described the premiere of *I briganti* as a well-deserved triumph, which reconfirmed Mercadante's mastery after *Elisa e Claudio*: "La première représentation d'*I Briganti* a eu lieu, hier, aux Bouffes, avec un grand succès. Des beautés, mais plutôt à la manière allemande qu'à l'italienne, et le mérite de l'exécution ont pleinement justifié ce triomphe de l'auteur d'*Elisa e Claudio*."³⁵ And the *Gazette des théâtres*, among others, also reported that the cast, and then Mercadante and his librettist, were acclaimed by the public at the curtain call: "M. Mercadante, demandé à la fin, est venu recueillir d'unanimes applaudissements ; puis M^{lle} Grisi, Rubini, Lablache, Tamburini, et enfin M. Crivelli [*sic*], l'auteur du *libretto*."³⁶

All this said, reviewers of *I briganti* were also quick to criticise the librettist and the weakness of his poetic choices. In most cases the press refrained from judging the libretto too harshly, but it could not help exhibiting a certain amount of scepticism about its dramatic substance and poetry. The *Courrier des théâtres* deliberately refrained from taking easy shots in order to criticize it: "Enfin, les Bouffes exécuteront aujourd'hui leur opéra nouveau, *I Briganti*, dont l'auteur mérite si bien un succès ! Tout semble le promettre. Il ne faut pas parler du *poème*, ce serait une fort mauvaise plaisanterie."³⁷ The *Revue et Gazette musicale*, after summing up Romani's 'betrayal', blamed on Crescini the creation of 'peculiar' and romantic brigands, and purveyors of good ideals.

M. Romani, la providence des compositeurs d'Italie, qui avait promis de venir *scritturare* [*sic*] un libretto per il signor Mercadante, n'ayant pas rempli cette mission musicale et littéraire, force a été d'avoir recours à un autre *signor poeta* ; et c'est ainsi que M. Crescini a été chargé de cette besogne dramatique. Il a donc pris pour sujet de son opéra, une fameuse tragédie allemande ; mais, craignant de blesser les susceptibilités aristocratiques du public éminemment délicat qui fréquente le théâtre Favart, en lui présentant les *Brigands* de Schiller dans leur nature abrupte, M. Crescini nous a fait des brigands comme on en voit peu, ou comme on n'en voit pas ; des brigands qui sont les plus honnêtes gens du monde, des brigands à l'eau rose [*sic*], quoiqu'ils aient des barbes noires et qu'ils n'aient pas de rouge ; des brigands vertueux enfin, qui brandissent bien quelque peu leurs poignards, mai seulement pour la forme, et dont tous les excès vont seulement à tenter une restauration en faveur du père de leur chef.³⁸

Albert Cler in *Le Charivari* offered a similar view, but somehow justified Crescini's choice of subject and its literary realization by assuming that depicting brigands as villains in the contemporary era would have made the topic anachronistic, and potentially subjected the opera to charges of plagiarism of French renditions of Schiller's plot, among which Lamartellière's 1792 translation for the Parisian theatre

³⁵ "Nouvelles de Paris", *Courrier des théâtres*, 23 March 1836, p. 3.

³⁶ "Nouvelles diverses", *Gazette des théâtres*, 24 March 1836, p. 416.

³⁷ "Nouvelles de Paris", *Courrier des théâtres*, 22 March 1836, p. 4.

³⁸ J. J. J. DIAZ [H. BLANCHARD], "*I briganti*, melodramma serio", *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 27 March 1836, p. 99-101.

was the most recognizable example.³⁹ The same article also quoted Crescini's own words from the introduction to the libretto for *I briganti*:

“Brigands, dit-il [Crescini] qui, dans le drame allemand, sont représentés comme une troupe de scélérats rompus à tous les vices, paraissent ici comme des hommes opposés à toute oppression injuste, amis de cette *innocente* indépendance qui ne viole aucun ordre, aucune loi. *Le noir aspect de la nuit, un ciel orangeux*, la nature dans sa secrète horreur, plaisent à leur esprits et répondent à leur caractère.”⁴⁰

Hippolyte Prévost's article in the *Revue du théâtre* represented an extreme in this sense, commenting in this way: “Le nouvel opéra de Mercadante, qu'on nous avait annoncé dès les premiers jours de la saison italienne comme un opéra *bouffe*, n'a rien moins que ce caractère. Le sujet est tiré des *Brigands* de Schiller ; le *libretto* est digne de ceux sur lesquels ont l'habitude d'écrire les *maëstri* italiens, c'est-à-dire qu'il est détestable.”⁴¹

La Quotidienne spilled a good amount of ink criticising first Crescini's libretto, and then the inadequacy of the musical treatment of Schiller's plot:

Si le libretto était de quelque importance dans la confection d'un opéra italien, nous nous donnerions la peine de discuter le choix que M. Crescini a fait d'une œuvre de Schiller qui, de l'aveu même du poète allemand, n'est pas un drame, mais une étude métaphysique des opérations les plus mystérieuses de l'âme. Cet essai psychologique sur le remords et sur la conscience, cette chaleureuse et violente déclamation contre la société, où, avec une verve déplorable, le jeune génie de Schiller a déposé tout ce qu'il ressentait de haine et de mépris pour la civilisation, était un sujet peu propre aux mélodies ; aussi le poète italien a-t-il laissé de côté la pensée philosophique du poète allemand pour se jeter dans les banalités du drame et s'est fort bien accommodé des lieux communs que Schiller avait été contraint d'ajouter à sa pièce pour en rendre la représentation supportable ; ce qui lui faisait dire « que son ouvrage était comme ces jeunes mauvais sujets dont les qualités et les vices sont inséparables et forment un ensemble qu'on court le risque de gâter en cherchant à les corriger ». Le libretto italien a plus d'analogie avec *Robert chef de brigands* de Lamartellière, joué avec un si prodigieux succès par Baptiste aîné, en 1793, sur le théâtre du Marais, qu'avec le drame de Schiller.⁴²

Perhaps the most benevolent response to Crescini's and Mercadante's joint effort came from Édouard Monnais, in the *Courrier français*. After a vivid depiction of Mercadante's misfortunes, he decisively took Crescini's side, appreciating the audacity of stepping in to save the day:

Enfin, la nécessité est devenue impérieuse : la saison touchait à son terme ; heureusement il s'est rencontré un poète sans prétention et de bonne volonté, qui a consenti à rimer au pied levé une

³⁹ Schiller's work from 1781 became extremely popular in the theatres of revolutionary Paris, also adapted and translated by Friedel and de Bonneville as *Les voleurs* (1785). *Robert, chef de brigands drame en cinq actes, en prose, imité de l'allemand : remis au théâtre français l'an VII : conforme à la représentation par le citoyen Lamartellière* was written in 1792 and, according to the 1835-36 press, was staged in the drama theatres of the city at the same time as Mercadante's and Crescini's opera saw the light. For more information about Schiller's *Die Räuber* and translation, see P. MORTENSEN, « Robbing *The Robbers*: Schiller, Xenophobia and the Politics of British Romantic Translation », *Literature and History* XI (2002), p. 41-61; R. LELIÈVRE, “Le Théâtre Allemand en France”, *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, XL (1974), p. 256-292.

⁴⁰ A. CLER, “Théâtre Italien”, *Le Charivari*, 24 March 1836, p. 1.

⁴¹ H. PRÉVOST, “Théâtre Italien. *I briganti*”, *Revue du théâtre*, March 1836, p. 8.

⁴² J.-T. MERLE (?), “Revue dramatique. Théâtre Italien”, *La Quotidienne*, 25 March 1836, p. 2.

certaine quantité de chœurs, duos, cavatines et romances : le corps des librettistes en sera peut-être indigné, et le regardera comme un faux frère ; nous ne nous en croyons que plus obligés à lui accorder indulgence et faveur.⁴³

Turning to the music, the critical assessment of Mercadante's *I briganti* is even more difficult to synthesize. Indeed, the majority of the reviewers were inclined to blame the libretto for many of the weaknesses of its musical setting. In particular, the choice of constructing a three-act-piece was considered unfortunate, and the third act was generally recognized as the Achilles' heel of the opera because of its length and unbalanced role in the articulation of the drama. For example, Merruau, author of the 9 April *feuilleton* in *Le Temps* criticized the exceedingly symmetrical and almost pedantic structure of the act and listed the all-too-predictable alternation of individual numbers and ensemble pieces whose mere function was to provide equal weight to all protagonists, while *Le Charivari* suggested that:

Sous le rapport musical, le troisième acte ne nous semble pas observer la règle du *crescendo*. Il n'offre guère de remarquable que la cavatine d'Amélie, avec accompagnement d'un chœur de suivantes, l'andante du final et les dernières mesures qui précèdent la chute du rideau. Il faut donc que cet acte gagne en rapidité ce qu'il perd en beauté.⁴⁴

Even while taking a positive view of the premiere, *Le Charivari* identified possible cuts, including the duet between the count and Amélie, three adagios for Hermann, and some solos in the first two acts. Intriguingly, the following review in *Le Charivari* reported a more successful second performance, after Mercadante had applied all cuts suggested in the previous article.

L'auteur d'*Elisa e Claudio* et d'*I Briganti*, M. Mercadante, avait suffisamment établi sa réputation d'habile compositeur ; il vient de prouver en outre qu'il est homme de tact et d'esprit. Mardi, tout en applaudissant l'ensemble vraiment remarquable de la nouvelle partition, le public avait paru accueillir moins favorablement quelques morceaux, non qu'ils manquaient absolument de mérite ; mais parce qu'ils faisaient longueur ou qu'ils ne semblaient pas à la hauteur des autres. Cette disposition s'était principalement manifestée dans le cours du troisième acte. Le lendemain quelques critiques, et nous fûmes de ce nombre, conseillèrent au compositeur un certain nombre de coupures. M. Mercadante, au lieu de répondre comme le chantraient les *Huguenots*, s'est empressé de soumettre son jugement à celui du public. Dès la seconde représentation, tous les morceaux indiqués, et entre autres le grand duo qui précède le dernier final, avaient complètement disparu. Cet acte de bon goût et de modestie est trop rare pour que nous ne nous empressions pas de le signaler avec éloge.⁴⁵

This attitude, praised as an act of modesty by the press, reflects in Mercadante's private correspondence the composer's surrendering feeling in front of all unfortunate events that involved the premiere of the opera. Turning again to Mercadante's few letters from the time preceding the opening night, they eloquently show that, drained

⁴³ É. MONNAIS, "Théâtre Italien", *Courrier français*, 26 March 1836, p. 1.

⁴⁴ A. CLER, "Première représentation d'*I Briganti*, opéra seria en trois actes paroles de M. Crescini, musique de Mercadante", *Le Charivari*, 24 March 1836, p. 6.

⁴⁵ A. CLER, "Théâtre Italien. Deuxième représentation d'*I Briganti* – Coupures", *Le Charivari*, 26 March 1836, p. 1.

by troubles and misfortune, the composer was not too concerned with consistency, but concentrated his efforts mostly on obtaining at least an acceptable baptism for his jinxed creation. On 14 March, just one week before the premiere, he wrote again to his friend Luigi Camoletti in Novara:

Tutti i giorni ci sembrano anni, e la bontà dei Rev. Sig. Canonici della quale abuso involontariamente, e solo per non poter abbandonare un'opera che mi costa sudori, sacrifici immensi, per la quale è (in alto grado) esposto il mio amor proprio, mi tengono ancora in questa città, altrimenti avrei piantato tutto e volato, se fosse possibile per adempire a' miei doveri. Era fissata la prima rappresentazione di questa benedetta e maledetta opera per il 1° corrente, si ammalò Rubini e furono sospese le prove. Fu rimessa al 15, altra malattia Grisi, *punto e da capo*. Il 19 doveva darsi senza fallo, nuovi ostacoli per l'orchestra ed il Coro i quali non hanno obbligo di provare i giorni di recita, io credo che se (per buona fortuna) la stagione di questo teatro non terminasse al 31 corrente, andrei in scena il giorno del giudizio. Questa mattina si è annunciata la prima recita per il 22. Speriamo che null'altro succederà e che tutto sia terminato una volta, mentre ti assicuro, ne sono stufo, annoiato quanto mai si può esserlo. [...] Quegl'infiniti giornali mi hanno messo alla moda, facendo continui articoli sulla mia vita, opere, ecc. e anche non hanno un aspetto ostile, benché non mi sia abbonato a nessuno, altrimenti ci voleva l'intera paga. I cantanti sembrano ben disposti e l'impresa e Rossini mi fanno il bocchino a riso... ma io dico... aspettiamo il 23.⁴⁶

Paying close attention to the French press, Mercadante was well aware of the high expectations surrounding the premiere of *I briganti*. His prompt reaction to the criticism raised from journals such as *Le Charivari* and his decision to apply the cuts suggested, as reported by the journal, are evidence that he was aware of the reviews appearing in the press the day after the opening night. Not surprisingly, most reviews of the premiere singled out the cast as the main strength of the new production, although according to some critics the decision to make the singers' parts equal and balanced, without privileging a main role, made their contribution less relevant to the action. Along these lines, the *Journal des débats* offered the following eloquent metaphor:

Cet opéra, avec les quatre grands virtuoses qui y paraissent, fait penser à un jour où, quatre soleils se promenant dans le ciel, on ne saurait jamais à quelle heure on est, où l'on ne verrait ni ombre ni clair sur les objets, où l'orient et l'occident seraient confondus, et où enfin l'œil, et par suite l'esprit, ne sachant à quoi se fixer, tomberaient dans la cécité et la stupeur.⁴⁷

Critics were also unanimous in recognizing Mercadante's choices of orchestral effects and treatment of voices. His musical setting was described as brilliant and expansive, and his far-sightedness and wisdom in enhancing the cast largely acknowledged.

Les personnes qui ont entendu la première représentation d'*I Briganti*, ont pu apprécier l'ampleur et la grandeur de cette partition, et rendre justice à la conscience musicale avec laquelle cette grande composition est traitée ; et quelle que soit leur opinion sur la facilité prodigieuse des maîtres italiens, elles n'apprendront pas sans surprise qu'il y a à peine deux

⁴⁶ Letter to Luigi Camoletti, 14 March 1836, n. 60, p. 164-165.

⁴⁷ D. [DELÉCLUZE], "Théâtre royal italien", *Journal des débats*, 24 March 1836, p. 1-2.

mois, il n'y avait pas non seulement une note écrite de la partition, mais que le poète même n'avait pas fait un seul vers du poème. En rendant hommage à l'inconcevable fécondité du compositeur, il est juste de le mettre à l'abri du reproche qu'on pourrait lui faire d'avoir, en quelques sorte, travaillé en poste.⁴⁸

Delécluze's review offers a balanced synthesis of the overall attitude of the press:

La musique des *Brigands*, comme toute celle de Mercadante, est conçue avec netteté et écrite avec beaucoup d'art et d'élégance. Peu de compositeurs connaissent aussi bien que cet auteur la portée et l'effet des instrumens combinés avec les voix. C'est ce que prouve surtout l'opéra dont nous venons de parler. Au surplus, ce mérite, vivement apprécié, n'a point empêché l'auditoire d'être très sensible aux beautés d'invention que renferment les *Brigands*. L'introduction, le chœur des femmes, le chœur religieux et le finale du premier acte, ainsi que la prière à la Vierge et le duo de la reconnaissance au second, et le trio de la fin du troisième, placent M. Mercadante au nombre des habiles compositeurs de nos jours.⁴⁹

Like Delécluze, others, too, favourably framed Mercadante's career and his undiscussed merits as a composer within a larger picture, but also identified weaknesses and strengths of his newborn opera, highlighting especially effective numbers but also analyzing the reasons for a mixed outcome. The critical view indicates that despite careful planning and possible compositional solutions to satisfy the taste of the French audience, Mercadante had to produce a new opera in haste, thus delaying until later works his own intuition and elaboration of the French operatic musical taste.

According to the press, the composer's main fault was perhaps the excessive effort to please the singers, which worked against a sense of consistency and unity. Aside from that, Mercadante was criticised by some as belonging to a school of Italian composers which privileges "roulades and endless cavatinas and cabalettas" instead of adopting formal and stylistic devices that would favour drama as opposed to vocal virtuosity.

Mercadante in Paris: The Aftermath

From the critical assessment of the 1836 premiere of *I briganti* to Blaze's 1842 statement reproduced at the beginning of this article, a substantial change indeed had taken place in Mercadante's style and in the way French critics perceived his uniqueness in adhering to the French *système lyrique*. During this time the operas of his so-called 'reform' period came to life, including some of his most successful works, such as *Il giuramento* and *La vestale*. Whether and to what extent these and other operas from the late 1830s and early 40s were the fruit of an authentic novel reformist impulse, remains an unresolved issue.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, if the general trend of scholarship agrees in recognizing the crucible of a new operatic language taking

⁴⁸ J.-T. MERLE (?), "Revue dramatique. Théâtre Italien", *La Quotidienne*, 28 March 1836, p. 2.

⁴⁹ D. [DELÉCLUZE], « Théâtre royal italien », *Journal des débats*, 24 March 1836, p. 1-2.

⁵⁰ About this debate and major scholars involved, see KOWALS, *Issues of Style*.

place between *I Normanni a Parigi* (1832) and *Il giuramento* (1837), Mercadante's experience in Paris should not be underestimated. Indeed the premiere of *I briganti* took place near the conclusion of this period, and therefore should no longer be considered a parenthetical event in Mercadante's career. The investigation of Mercadante's original ideas for his Parisian opera destined to never see the light, as well as of his work on *I briganti* first for the Parisian stage and then for the following Milanese and Venetian performances, is essential in order to understand the developments of his musical taste and dramaturgical choices.⁵¹ These experiences and the feedback and criticism received from the press during his Parisian stay left an indelible mark on Mercadante's compositional aesthetics, reinforcing his belief that it was necessary to develop an operatic language different from the Rossinian model – a belief which he had strongly expressed in his letters prior to his French endeavour.⁵²

Coming back to the press, the picture would not be complete without mentioning that in the first days of April 1836 both the *Courrier des théâtres* and *Revue et Gazette musicale* reported a brief piece of news. Following the success of *I briganti*, just before his journey back to Novara, Mercadante seems to have received a proposal to compose a new opera for the Opéra-Comique on a French libretto by “one of the most productive and fortunate poets of this theatre.”⁵³ It is possible to hypothesize that the librettist in question was Eugène Scribe or Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges, who were in the heyday of their career. However, such circumstance puts Mercadante into a rare position of an Italian composer invited to write an *opéra comique*, a fact that certainly deserves further investigation.⁵⁴ Mercadante's surviving correspondence, however, provides no explicit reference to future French engagements. The first letter Mercadante sent to Paris after his return to Novara is addressed to Eugène-Théodore Troupenas, very likely in relation to the publishing rights of *I briganti*, although the letter contains no explicit mention of the opera.⁵⁵ For a certain period after his return to Italy, Mercadante's surviving correspondence does not refer to his experience in Paris except for a single hint to the unsuccessful collaboration with Romani.

Mercadante did not mention Paris again until 30 March 1837, a couple of weeks after the successful premiere of *Il giuramento* at La Scala, when in one of his letters to Florimo, he wrote: “Se ciò avviene, l'inverno lo anderò a passare a Parigi dove

⁵¹ Once again, Wittmann's appeal needs to be heard and pursued. See WITTMANN, “Mercadante and Meyerbeer?” p. 115-132.

⁵² See abovementioned Wittmann's and Kowals' studies.

⁵³ The news is reported in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 10 April 1836 and *Courrier des théâtres*, on the same date.

⁵⁴ Being such a national, quasi-idiomatic genre for French theatre, foreigners who were invited to write for the Opéra-Comique, were only a few. Among them, Michele Carafa (*Jeanne d'Arc à Orléans*, *Le Solitaire*, etc.) who lived in Paris and gained French citizenship, represents a unique case, as well as Donizetti and his *La Fille du régiment* (1840). The invitation extended to Mercadante proves extraordinary in this sense.

⁵⁵ Letter to M. Troupenas, 17 June 1836, n. 61, p. 166.

darò un'Opera in francese di genere Comico.”⁵⁶ The letter is known to scholars mainly because it contains a description of the success obtained by *Il giuramento* and of the novelties introduced in the composition of the opera. But the passage related to the composer's upcoming French undertaking has been overlooked. There is no detail about a subject or a specific libretto, but Mercadante's words may indicate that the press did not lie about his possible future involvement with the Opéra or the Opéra-Comique.⁵⁷ In 1847, an even more interesting letter, undated and without the recipient's name, but very likely destined to Florimo, Mercadante wrote:

Non ho mai dimesso il pensiero per l'affare di Parigi, ma non mi convenne di spingermi, dopo l'accaduto con il D.re Mons Leon Pilé [*sic*]⁵⁸ – Questi mi scrisse, e voleva che in tutta fretta nello spazio di soli quattro mesi nel cor.te anno teatrale io ponessi in musica un'Opera in 4 atti di Dumas – Mi negai non potendo umanamente adempiere ad un impegno così precipitato, ma offersi di accettare per l'anno venturo qualora mi accordassero 8 mesi di tempo – Nulla mi fu risposto – ⁵⁹

There is no further indication about the libretto, and indeed no librettos based on Dumas' writings feature in Mercadante's output from this time or in any later works. What is clear, however, is that Mercadante never gave up on the idea of returning to Paris with a brand new opera explicitly written for the city, in this case most likely a *grand opéra* or “grand-opera” in four acts. But evidence about this endeavour in the correspondence stops here, and so too should speculation, at least for the time being.

To sum up: drawing on private correspondence and published records and criticism, this article has explored not only the French perception of Mercadante at the time of *I briganti*, but also the composer's attitude towards French music criticism and his self-fashioning, as filtered through the press. Mercadante was a tireless reader, and the evidence presented here suggests that he endeavoured to respond to the ‘characterization’ that the press built up over the years over his successes and failures. The constant concern for approval which emerges throughout his correspondence is an eloquent and unique testimony to his individual qualities, but also to the influence that published criticism exerted on the composer, who, we can imagine, as Donizetti and Bellini, composed with an eye on the music paper and another on the music columns of the press. This double orientation decisively drove the ‘European’ dimension of Mercadante's work, his self-assessment as a composer, and the development and ‘adjustments’ of his style to the expectations of his audience.

⁵⁶ Letter to Florimo, 30 March 1837, n. 65, p. 169-170.

⁵⁷ See previous reference in *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 10 April 1836 and *Courrier des théâtres*, on the same date (footnote 53).

⁵⁸ Léon Pillet.

⁵⁹ Letter to Florimo?, July? 1847, n. 122, p. 238-239.