

Operavore

A Verdian Season in New York

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By [Fred Plotkin](#)



From right to left: August Ventura, Marino Tiezzi, Paolo Zoppi, Lorenzo Giovati, Antonio Giovati, Enzo Petrolini and Victor De Renzi.

(Courtesy August Ventura)

Giuseppe Verdi, that colossus of opera and courageous nation-builder, was celebrated in New York last week in four distinct ways. There were important visitors from Parma, where Verdi is venerated. A small rendering of one of his early works got right to the core of his musical essence. And a performance of *Simon Boccanegra* at the Met instantly joined the short list of the greatest nights of opera I have ever experienced.

Had Verdi (1813-1901) just written two or three of his many masterpieces, he would still hold a place among the greatest opera composers. Had Verdi, through his music, only been the [voice and conscience](#) of the Italian people as they struggled to form their republic in the mid-19th century, he still would be considered among the most important political figures of his time. While the egotistical Wagner built the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth to enshrine his own operas and legacy, the noble Verdi built and funded a rest home for [retired musicians](#) in Milan as an expression of gratitude to his fellow artists.

On April 9, four members of Parma's legendary Club dei 27 — who consider themselves the guardians of all things Verdi — visited the statue of the composer on Broadway and 73rd Street. Many New Yorkers are not aware that on the Upper West Side Broadway passes three tributes to illustrious Italians. There is Christopher Columbus, of course, on Columbus Circle. On Broadway at 64th Street is a small triangular patch of land opposite Lincoln Center that has a statue of Dante Alighieri, Italy's finest writer. And Verdi is a few blocks north.

The Club dei 27 is a group of men formed in the late 1950s in which each of its members represents one of Verdi's operas plus the [Messa da Requiem](#). Each member is responsible for and an authority on one work. They tend to go by the names of their operas. The club never sought to exclude women, who have their own club, Le Verdissime.

I visited the club a few years ago and sat at a table with members to talk about the Maestro. The mood was informal but serious. "Il Trovatore" led a discussion on the interpretation of certain roles. "Un giorno di regno" cooked. "Aïda" served the food and then cleaned up.

The four members who came to New York were Antonio Giovati ("Messa da Requiem"), who brought his nine-year old son Lorenzo; Enzo Petrolini ("Un giorno di regno"), who is president of the club; Marino Tiezzi ("Un ballo in maschera"); and Paolo Zoppi ("Falstaff"). They placed 27 red roses at the base of the Verdi statue and sang "Va Pensiero" from *Nabucco* along with Verdi-loving New Yorkers. Victor DeRenzi, artistic director of the [Sarasota Opera](#), which has just completed a cycle in which all of Verdi's works were performed, joined them as well.

The ceremony was organized by August Ventura, a New Yorker who bears more than a passing physical resemblance to Verdi. Ventura has lovingly worked for years on a documentary film about the club that I look forward to seeing. The New Yorker just published [a charming piece](#) about the event.

On April 11, Anna Maria Meo, the new head of the [Verdi Festival](#) in Parma, spoke at the Italian Cultural Institute about the upcoming program in October (the month of Verdi's birth). Three of the operas chosen — *Don Carlo*, *Giovanna d'Arco* and *I Masnadieri* — are based on the works of the German writer Friedrich Schiller. There will also be a new production of *Il Trovatore* and numerous orchestral concerts, recitals and other performances commissioned for the festival. Of particular note is that Parma's historic Teatro Farnese (which turns 500 in 2017) has been made viable for performances for the first time in many years and will host concerts and *Giovanna d'Arco*.

On April 12, there was a small-scale, pared down performance of [Nabucco](#) at the Center for Jewish History that starred French baritone David Serero in the title role. This opera, which normally features a large cast and chorus, had six performers and was presented on a small stage with piano accompaniment. And yet it did not feel like opera in concert.

Being close to the singers and hearing Verdi's music so intimately had the unexpected effect of taking the listener closer to the melodies than one normally experiences when an opera is presented in full production with large orchestra. This is not necessarily a model one would follow in all circumstances, but it had a particular force because *Nabucco* (1842) was the passionate expression of a young composer whose wife and two children had just died within 18 months, and he channeled his grief to produce his first masterpiece.

On April 14, [news came](#) that James Levine, who gave his Met first performance in 1971, would relinquish his title of music director at the end of the season and become music director emeritus. The April 16 *Simon Boccanegra*, the last of the season, was Levine's first performance since that epochal announcement.

This opera is one of Levine's favorites. It is the ultimate "lion in winter" story of a man whose private struggles become entwined with his public duties. Boccanegra is besieged on all sides, and as his own demise becomes inevitable, he summons the will to achieve final acts of courage and equanimity. At this performance, art did not imitate life. Rather, it made us understand the human condition more profoundly.

It is not my custom to write reviews. So my comments are those of an experienced (to put it mildly) operagoer who happens to count this Verdi masterpiece among his favorite operas. Anyone who was there will not forget it. Ever. It was an extraordinary night in the opera world (not just at the Met) in that it inevitably combined the timeless and the temporal.

Levine and the orchestra were accorded huge ovations from start to finish, but what was most discernible that night was the great wash of emotion surrounding him from the audience, the orchestra pit and the stage. Consummate genius-artist that he is, he held everyone and everything together, guiding a last-minute substitution in one role with his customary attentive warmth.

While the ovations and curtain calls could and should have been much longer, they were more lengthy than most these days at the Met and deeply heartfelt. Every member of the cast was in top form. Emotions went beyond the powerful feelings this opera already evokes. At moments, it was hard for performers and audience members who understood what underpinned this evening not to be overwhelmed.

Lianna Haroutounian was a warm and sympathetic Amelia, the one soaring female voice among five men. Joseph Calleja as Gabriele Adorno was white-hot vocally and dramatically, lifting the performance with his tenor voice when things got too sad. Stephen Gaertner (Paolo) and the ever-reliable Richard Bernstein (Pietro) provided vocal and theatrical ballast as the conspirators.

Ferruccio Furlanetto is a singer and actor of extraordinary complexity and power. He simply has no equal. When other basses play Jacopo Fiesco, the character is often depicted as angry and bitter. Those attributes are only one element of Furlanetto's portrayal, which turns Fiesco into a huge moral force, a reservoir of memory with a sense of justice (more than revenge) who is the ultimate truth teller. Remarkable.

Plácido Domingo was amazing in the title role. I have tired of hearing people complain that he is not a natural-born baritone and that, at 75, he is too old and self-indulgent to be appearing in major opera roles. The performance he gave would be unforgettable for someone seeing him for the first time or the 500th. His voice is wonderfully expressive in this towering dramatic part. To me, Domingo's Boccanegra equals his Otello but is in a range that is now more congenial (not ideal, perhaps, but I really don't care). The acting and musicianship were sensational.

The cast took several group curtain calls in front of the Met's beautiful gold curtain (which we see too rarely nowadays) so that they could gesture to and applaud James Levine. Most audience members could not see the maestro in his motorized chair in the orchestra pit, but seeing the faces of the six singers said everything. Domingo, almost near tears, at a certain point made a sign of the cross.

A video of that curtain call appeared on YouTube soon after the performance. When I first watched it, what I saw was but a reminder of something I had just experienced. Seeing it three days later, my eyes welled with tearful admiration and gratitude not only for artists who so profoundly understand and transmit the power of Verdi's humanity but for the man himself. Viva Verdi!



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