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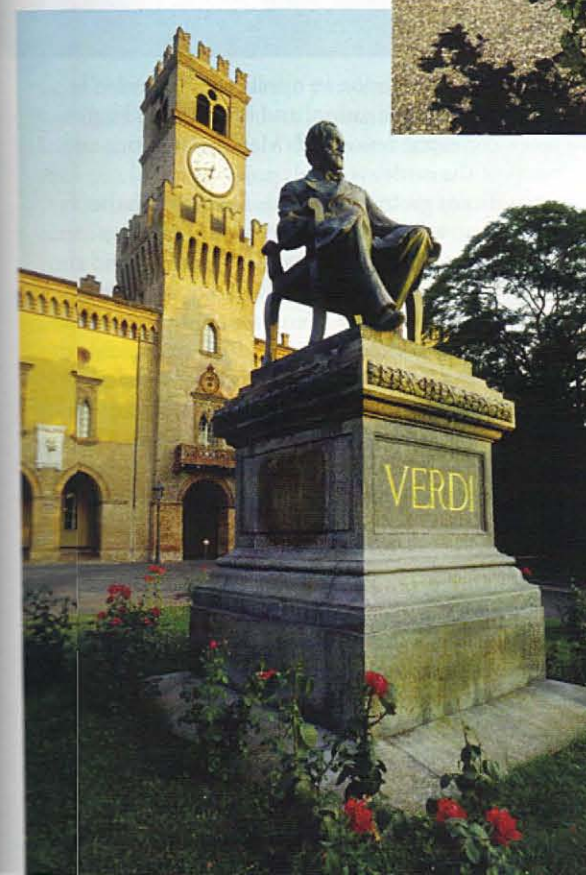
Il Corsaro

The Source

AUGUST VENTURA travels to Busseto,
the town that remains inextricably linked
with the life and works of Verdi.



Verdi's birthplace at
Le Roncole, above;
the composer's home in
Sant'Agata, Villa Verdi, right;
the statue of the composer in
front of Busseto's Teatro Verdi,
below; the path to Villa Verdi,
opposite page



In Italy's Po Valley, not far from Parma,
lies a rather picturesque area

known as *la Bassa*, the lowland, often overlooked but essential for having given to Italian opera its social conscience and its throbbing heart — Giuseppe Verdi. Here in *la Bassa*, the small town of Busseto and its environs, now promoted as “The Land of Verdi,” maintain much of the appearance they had during the composer's lifetime. It's a peaceful place, abundant in historic sites and museums that reward the visitor by tracing the entire arc of Verdi's life and work with resonance and immediacy. That arc might just close into a perfect circle, should your visit coincide with a performance of one of his works presented at the intimate Teatro Verdi in Busseto. Think of it as opera's equivalent to the Slow Food movement, whereby you visit your opera at its source and raise your awareness of how it came into being, all within a locavore-approved radius of about three miles. If such a movement were ever to gain traction, where better to plant a flag than the very spot where Giuseppe Verdi, composer, intersects with Joe Green, gentleman farmer?

The best time to visit is October, when the month-long Festival Verdi holds pride of place in nearby Parma, and when full-rigged performances are presented in Busseto. The local Emilian cuisine enjoys a reputation as one of the finest in Italy, and rich autumn harvests allow it to attain its fullest expression in seasonal specialties. Mornings usually arrive with a dense fog that hangs in the air, but sunlight eventually burns off the mist to reveal occasional trees — oaks, walnuts, poplars — in their

splendid autumn colors. They provide vertical relief from the utter flatness of this terrain, which is traversed by narrow roads extending straight to their vanishing points.

The logical approach to reaping Busseto's Verdian riches is to explore the composer's life in a chronological way, starting with a visit to his true birthplace in nearby Le Roncole. There is not much more here than an intersection of two otherwise minor roads, but among its few buildings are the Casa Natale di Verdi (his birthplace, now a museum) and the Church of San Michele. Immediately, a sense of the everyday hardscrabble lives of the nineteenth-century working poor is evoked. This stone house, beneath a broad single gable, once functioned as a tavern operated by the Verdi family. On the ground floor, the visitor finds a warren of severe, white-stucco rooms with spare but functional furnishings that once served the public needs of the business. Above, accessed by narrow stairways, is a cluster of even smaller rooms. This was the private domain, where life was lived during the few non-working hours. One of these rooms is the matrimonial chamber where Giuseppe Verdi was brought into the world on October 10, 1813. Annually on this date,

in a scene of almost sacramental reverence, the members of the Club dei 27, that most exclusive of opera societies and guardians of the Verdi tabernacle, so to speak, convene at this spot, bearing twenty-seven roses, to sing "Va, pensiero" to honor the Master. (See "Coda," page 76.)

Only steps away, San Michele preserves the original church organ from which Verdi first heard music, and upon which he played his earliest compositions. Being a child prodigy, however, is never enough on its own to ensure success, especially when economic choices are few. Luckily for Verdi, and the world, generous support and guidance were proffered by Antonio Barezzi, a prosperous merchant from Busseto. In the history of the arts, few artist-patron narratives are as heartfelt as this one. Not only were provisions made for his musical studies, but before long, Verdi, at seventeen, was taken into the Barezzi household as a ward; he would later marry his patron's daughter Margherita. The Casa Barezzi, now a museum, makes a fitting first stop upon arrival in Busseto.

Like most of Busseto's monuments, Casa Barezzi blends discreetly into the town's urban fabric almost to the point of concealment. What's striking is how admirably Busseto — prosperous and workaday, with strong links to its agrarian traditions — venerates the memory of its most famous resident with hardly a whiff of crass commercialism. Thus, you will likely pass by the simple marker for Casa Barezzi at least once, tucked away as it is in one of the arcaded palazzos that line the narrow via Roma, Busseto's principle axis. Inside and upstairs, the museum preserves the gracious interior of the historic salon where, in 1830, Verdi gave his first public concert. A Viennese Tomasek fortepiano is prominent, the very instrument on which Verdi composed *I Due Foscari* and would later play "Va, pensiero" in 1867 to comfort his beloved mentor and father-in-law on his deathbed.

The museum houses adjacent modern rooms where the important Stefanini Collection is on permanent display. Letters, scores, historic posters and ephemera crowd the walls alongside iconic portraits of Verdi and his circle. The collection is not without its humorous touches; one wall displays several biting satirical caricatures of the day, including one of a jovial-faced Verdi turning the crank of a hurdy-gurdy on which the words "Don Carlo" are etched.

A few miles outside of Busseto, the peaceful Villa Verdi in Sant'Agata retreats into a sun-dappled, forested setting. By the time he acquired this property, in 1848, Verdi had suffered a series of setbacks that would have stopped any lesser being. The loss of his two young children to disease and the early death of his wife, Margherita, all within a period of two years, was compounded by the public rejection of his second opera, *Il Giorno di Regno*. For Verdi, renewal lay ahead in a furious output of later stage successes, and in his liaison, then lifelong union, with the singer Giuseppina Strepponi, who sang the first Abigail in *Nabucco*, in 1842. The couple shared a domestic arrangement at this Villa that was deemed unacceptable by many of Busseto's more tradition-bound citizens; Strepponi was, after all, a "fallen"

woman who not only pursued a career but had children of her own from at least one previous unwedded relationship. Such disapproval was sometimes expressed by a shower of insults hurled at her person, or in subtler but more insidious ways, such as vicious gossip and social ostracism. To wander these spacious rooms with their comfortable original furnishings is to sense what an idyllic refuge Verdi had created for the pair, yet one that must often have felt like a prison to the intelligent and artistically gifted Strepponi, by now diminished in her vocal powers. The visitor to Villa Verdi is unlikely ever to experience *La Traviata* in quite the same way.

The composer's study contains his original day bed, writing desk and piano, forming a sort of triangulated nexus where Verdi's supernova of creativity brought forth the great works. This is the writing desk where he, in effect, provided the

The exterior and interior of Teatro Verdi in Busseto



soundtrack for Italian Unification in operas that expressed his utter disdain for foreign domination, and from which he maintained a vigorous correspondence with Manzoni, Cavour and other champions of the cause.

Tour the magnificent grounds, and this Founding Father of Italian liberty takes on a Jeffersonian hue. Verdi's earnings allowed him to acquire adjacent tracts of land, farmed and irrigated with modern methods of the day. Recently, architectural sketches in Verdi's own hand have been brought to light, detailing the Villa's expansion and the layout of the lush gardens with rambling pathways and a fanciful grotto. He also introduced exemplars of exotic flora from distant parts of the world, acquired at various exhibitions, which still flourish — including a magnificent grouping of Louisiana cypresses.

Back in Busseto, additional sights await, such as the newly minted Museo Nazionale Giuseppe Verdi, which opened in 2009 in the Villa Pallavicino. It's a ten-minute walk from Casa Barezzi, but one that returns to the open vistas of *la Bassa*. The villa itself is a Renaissance marvel with tended grounds, surrounded by a moat that seems more decorative than defensive. Inside, the splendid rooms maintain their majestic proportions and enfilades; their ornate ceilings and detailing are intact. Individually, however, these spaces have been masterfully trans-

formed into separate environments that thematically recreate the earliest productions of a given Verdi masterpiece — the Aida Room, the Trovatore Room, and so on. Original wing-and-drop set designs for these operas have been photo-enlarged to cover entire walls, placing the viewer inside the stage space in a way no book illustration can. It is a fitting monument to the vanishing art of painted scenery, and perhaps a necessary one, as traditional productions of Verdi become increasingly rare. Of all Busseto's museums, this is the only one that approximates a theme-park attraction, yet even so, the museum aims high for the intellect and squarely meets its mark.

All of Busseto's places of interest are mere steps away from the predictably named Piazza Verdi, an attractively verdant urban space girded by arcades. It is dominated by the Municipal Building, a severe-looking structure with the appearance of a medieval fortress, which houses the Teatro Verdi. A fine bronze statue of a seated Verdi, dedicated on the composer's centennial in 1913, appropriately faces Casa Barezzi from the center lawn. On opera nights the plantings are festively ringed by candle luminarias.



de *Attila* is sung here by a winning hand of five aces in the lead roles, conducted by the gifted and youthfully charismatic Andrea Battistoni, the result is thrilling. On this particular evening, the sensory experience merges with the heightened consciousness gained by having delved deeply into the composer's life and very essence.

Italy has entered the 150th anniversary of its Unification, toward which *Attila* and the operas leading up to 1861 were stepping stones, an occasion not just for flag-waving but for deep introspection, as Italy grapples with questions of its national identity and confronts divisive forces, this time from within. Tonight, the opera house is one communal milieu where boundaries between popular entertainment and high art seem to vanish, and the evening approximates some imagined idea of what operagoing must have been like in Verdi's time.

The circle closes, but it's still necessary to ponder a different kind of Verdi score — one he never quite settled with this town that claims him as its own. Although he is affectionately known as "il Cigno" (the Swan) of Busseto, Verdi never could forgive its citizens for their harsh treatment of Strepponi. It is accepted as fact that he never once set foot inside the theater the town built in his honor (though he did contribute a substantial sum toward its construction). At the height of his fame, Verdi stated the following credo: "I am, and shall always remain, a simple man from le Roncole" — words expressing deep attachment to this land but, apparently, carefully chosen to distance himself from Busseto. None of this may truly matter in the long run, but it's helpful to be reminded of *something* that prevents Verdi from seeming a bit *too* perfect and makes him more like one of us mere mortals, or, more to the point, like so many of the stage personas he brought to vivid life — noble in their intentions,

Views of the Villa Pallavicino, which houses the Museo Nazionale Giuseppe Verdi, left and below



Lucky ticket-holders fill the provincially elegant Caffè Centrale to overflowing for one last pre-curtain sip before they sweep across the piazza in a procession that gives the feeling of attending a private banquet. Now it's time to experience some opera, as Verdi comes alive in performance.

This three-tiered theater seats just over 300 but always seems to pack in a few dozen more. During Festival Verdi, it usually plays host to his rarities. *Oberto* and *Il Corsaro* were presented here in recent seasons, and *Attila* was given in 2010. Cast and orchestra sizes tend to be quite large, considering the tight surroundings. There may be houses where Verdi is presented more grandly, but it is hard to imagine a place where he is performed with greater conviction and immediacy, or with a better connection to his audience. Sit in one of the side stage-boxes, and you can practically feel the corporeal exertion off the singers. Sit farthest away, upstairs in the *loggione* on stools elbow-to-elbow with local families, and you are still just a rose's toss from the action onstage. When a ferocious, full-throt-

admirable in their actions, yet bearing some recognizable flaw within the complexity of their character. □

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Coda Appassionati Verdiani

BY FRED PLOTKIN

I usually agree with Groucho Marx, who said that he would never belong to a club that would have him as a member. But I would make an exception for the Club dei 27, honoring Giuseppe Verdi's twenty-six operas, plus the *Messa da Requiem*. This all-male group was founded in 1958 in Parma, when twenty-seven Appassionati Verdiani (as the club was then known) drew lots to determine which opera would be associated with each member. From that time forward, every opera, plus the *Requiem*, has had a standard-bearer. While not required to be an expert on that opera, each man seems to develop a special feeling for his own work's story, music and characters.

When a club member retires or dies, his opera becomes available to the next person who gains membership. Enzo Petrolini (*Un Giorno di Regno*), son of an original member, witnessed the first drawing at age ten; his father wanted *Un Ballo in Maschera* but got *Il Corsaro*. "Some were unhappy with the operas they drew. One said he would only join if he drew *Otello*, and — was it a miracle? — he got *Otello*." No woman has ever applied, but the men insist they would be welcomed.

It was, I'm sure, thanks to *la forza del destino* that I became friends — on Facebook, no less — with Paolo Zoppi, a man from Parma who has images of Verdi on his page. I had always wanted to know about the club, and it turned out that Paolo is *Falstaff*. Though more svelte than "vecchio John," Paolo has a similar *buon'umore*. Through him, I attended a meeting of the Club last February. Seventeen of the twenty-seven were present, ranging from the first three operas (*Oberto*, *Un Giorno di Regno*, *Nabucco*) to the last three (*Aida*, *Otello*, *Falstaff*).

Club members work in many professions. Eleven are in business or banking. *Nabucco* is a fruit seller. *I Lombardi*, *Alzira* and *Macbeth* are doctors, *Giovanna d'Arco* and *Luisa Miller* are nurses. *La Forza del Destino* is a dentist. *Ernani* is a journalist, *La Traviata* an elementary-school teacher. *Stiffelio* is a jeweler, and *Rigoletto* owns Azzali, Parma's excellent shop for recordings and music books. *Il Corsaro* sells marble. *Don Carlo* is a soccer referee. The *Requiem* is a lawyer.

The club's quarters are located beneath Parma's superb Casa della Musica museum. There are three contiguous rooms that lead to a larger meeting space. In it stand twenty-seven tall wood chairs, each carved with an image from a different Verdi work, which are also represented on twenty-seven *boccali* (tankards). When all members gather, they are like knights of the Verdian grail.

Club members meet almost every Thursday to talk about everything relating to Verdi,

whom most refer to as Il Maestro. They listen to music, debate the virtues of singers, conductors and directors, and talk about how to further the cause of Verdi in the world. *Alzira* (Giovanni Conti) notes, "Verdi can defend himself. He doesn't need us." Yet all of these men steep themselves in everything Verdian out of love for this great man and what he means. "We are not Italians, we are from Parma," says *Il Trovatore* (Giovanni Reverberi), reflecting a prevailing view in this country, where people find identity in their home cities and little more. "Verdi was a great man of the nation," *Giovanna d'Arco* (Fernando Zaccarini) adds. "Verdi spoiled it for other composers, because he was so great, ingenious, so complete. It was difficult for anyone — even Puccini — to follow him."

All twenty-seven Appassionati Verdiani travel to his birthplace in Roncole twice a year: on October 10, they leave twenty-seven red roses to commemorate his birth, and on January 27 they leave a large crown of laurels to recall his death. According to Paolo, Verdi's importance came in his having lived for almost all of the nineteenth century. His music and operas evolved to reflect his times. "In 1842, with *Nabucco*, he interpreted the society he saw. With Verdi and Garibaldi leading the way, Italy unified in 1861. The last word of *Aida* (1871) is *pace* (peace). *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893) were more personal works of an old man whose skills were so refined and essential."

Verdi was a man who loved food, and club members honor him that way at every gathering. On my visit, *Un Giorno di Regno* cooked perfect *conchiglie* with tomatoes and mushrooms, served by *Aida*. The pasta was topped with freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano (no "Parmesan" here!) and washed down with local *vino rosso* labeled "Club dei 27," with a picture of Verdi. *I Vespri Siciliani* sliced succulent prosciutto di Parma and salame di Felino. Cheese and honey came forth, along with tangerines and local cherries in brandy made by *Il Trovatore*.

Groucho Marx and his brothers parodied *Il Trovatore* in *A Night at the Opera*, so I don't think this club would want him as a member. But they could probably benefit from more *appassionati verdiani*. It's time to create chapters in other cities as the world prepares for Verdi's bicentennial in 2013. □

FRED PLOTKIN is the author of *Opera 101* and *Italy for the Gourmet Traveler*.

