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HONORING VERDI ON SEVENTY-SECOND STREET

BY CLAUDIA ROTH PIERPONT

The statue of Giuseppe Verdi, set high above a patch of daffodils, draws scant attention from people hurrying to the subway at

Seventy-second Street and Broadway, or even from people lounging on the nearby benches of what used to be called Needle Park, back in the city's drug-infested era. Impressively spruced up now, Verdi Square, which, like many city squares, is actually a triangle, has seen some fine musical events in the past decade, since the Verdi Square Festival was founded. But a real Verdian apotheosis, complete with chorus, took place on a recent chilly Saturday morning, when a crowd of music-mad New Yorkers gathered to watch five Italian visitors—four men and one small boy—place a bouquet of roses at the composer's marble feet. Twenty-seven roses, to be exact, for the twenty-seven operas the Maestro composed, a number contested in scholarly circles but taken as a matter of faith by the visiting men, members of the fabled Club dei 27, which is based in the Verdian territory of Parma, just miles from the composer's birthplace, and is among the most dauntingly exclusive opera clubs in the world.

The citizens of Parma, steeped in music, take their responsibilities toward their native son very seriously. And none more so than the twenty-seven *appassionati Verdiani*, who are elected to the club for life, and who, outside their day jobs (soccer coach, teacher, surgeon), assume the names of Verdi's operas: the four visitors to New York are addressed as Falstaff, Un Ballo in Maschera, Un Giorno di Regno (the club's president, he takes some ribbing for embodying a less than stellar work), and Messa da Requiem. (Verdi himself would not have considered the Requiem Mass an opera, but even with twenty-seven places the wait for entry into the Club is about ten years. Women have formed a separate club, Le Verdissime, where they assume the names of Verdi's heroines.) In Parma, the club's primary mission is to promote musical education in local schools and to maintain musical standards through extremely close listening to the master's works. "In New York, like most places, people go to the opera to have a good time," Falstaff observes, having just seen his first performance at the Metropolitan Opera. "In Parma, no. Not us. We go only to hear how they sing." "And," Un Giorno di Regno adds, "to judge."



The Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi.

Audiences in Parma are infamously tough; opera there can be something of a blood sport. Rampant are the stories about campaigns of boos and whistles that forced the curtain down in mid-performance and sent singers rushing for the the *pernacchia*—what we would call a Bronx cheer—is a step too far.) But Parma can also confer a singular triumph, in a familiar sort of way: if you can make it there, you'll make it anywhere. The visitors pronounce themselves pleased to find Parma-style ardor among the New Yorkers gathered in tribute: the professional singers ("I haven't seen you since I sang Philip II!"), the opera directors and musicians (the Met Opera cellist David Heiss reports a preference for "Don Carlo," "because of the big cello tunes"), and the amateur singers and musicians who form one of the city's inner worlds, and who today proudly share in the glory of being recognized as true *Verdiani*.

After the nine-year-old son of *Messa da Requiem* has laid down the roses, and Il Giorno di Regno has made a brief speech, it's time to sing. Out of the entire Verdi repertory, there is one clear choice: "Va pensiero," a chorus composed by the young and patriotic Verdi in 1841, while northern Italy was under Austrian rule. As the centerpiece of his first successful opera, "Nabucco," the chorus is sung by exiled Hebrew slaves in Babylon, but even people who don't know one opera from another have reason to know this music. It has become an international anthem, a universal expression of the longing for liberty, sung in recent years from South Africa to Athens; the dozens of versions on YouTube include a heartbreaking performance (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2d9qmbYdLQ>) at the memorial service last November in Paris, in the stately courtyard of Les Invalides, for the victims of the terrorist attacks.

In New York, the crowd on the glorified traffic island sings fervently, the melody swelling and the text—*O mia patria, si bella e perduta!*—ringing clear. (A local Verdian, August Ventura, who is making a documentary film about the Club dei 27, has handed out a crib sheet.) *Oh my country, so beautiful and lost!* Even among the cognoscenti gathered here, few remember that the handsome statue of Verdi was erected to reduce the anti-immigrant prejudices of a century ago. Some things change; some things don't. The music takes effect, its beauty imbuing the mournful text with irrepressible hope as the voices fade to a rapt conclusion. And then Un Giorno di Regno cries out four sharp staccato notes: "Viva Verdi!"



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