

GIUSEPPE VERDI (Composer) 200th Anniversary

Giuseppe Verdi took himself very seriously, called himself "a craftsman" and thought himself "the least erudite among past and present composers". *Giuseppe Verdi* was also the most popular composer of operas for much of the 19th century: a political lightning rod, and the musical giant of his native Italy.

He was born and grew up in the small town of Roncole, near Busseto on 10th October 1813, in the duchy of Parma, the son of an innkeeper. He studied with the village organist until the age of ten and then sent to live with a family friend in Busseto.

A generous and well-to-do local merchant perceived the boy's talent and when local resources proved insufficient, sent *Verdi* to Milan to study at the local conservatory. *Verdi* was rejected but remained in Milan taking private lessons for two years in order to correct his deficiencies, and then began work on an opera entitled, *Oberto*. Returning to Busseto in 1834, he began to court his patron's daughter, Margherita, and eventually won her hand.

The success of *Oberto* at La Scala led to a contract for three more operas. The first, a comic piece, was a dismal failure, composed while *Verdi* was mourning the deaths of both his children and his wife Margherita. The overwhelming family tragedy coupled with the catcalls of his bored audience convinced *Verdi* to consider abandoning composition forever. However, his mentor at La Scala, the impresario Bartolomeo Merelli, had other ideas. He pressed *Verdi* to go to work on a libretto refused by Otto Nicolai. Although initially reluctant, once *Verdi* began to work, the music poured from his broken heart and in three short months *Nabucco* was completed in 1842. Then came many other operas including *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il Trovatore* (1853), *La Traviata* (1853), *Don Carlos* (1867), *Aïda* (1871).

A fervent nationalist, he was regarded as a great national figure. After composing his *Requiem* (1874) he retired, but when Giovanni Ricordi the violinist who founded the Classical Musical Publishing Co. brought him together with the poet and composer Arrigo Boito, initially to revise *Simon Boccanegra*, (a 3 act play originally composed in 1857 and revised in 1881), their mutual esteem led to the two great operas in *Verdi's* old age, *Otello* (1886) and *Falstaff* (1890).

Verdi remarried in 1859, after living openly (and scandalously) with soprano Giuseppina Strepponi for many years. There were no children. The composer was elected to the first Parliament of modern Italy, where he served for many years. *Verdi* did not participate in debates, but on at least one occasion, set the parliamentary proceedings to music. Unfortunately these manuscripts vanished long ago.

When his beloved second wife Giuseppina died in 1897, it killed his desire to compose. *Verdi* suffered a stroke while visiting friends in Milan and lingered unconscious for a week. He was so loved by the people that the streets around the hotel where he lay dying, were covered in a thick layer of straw to muffle the sound of traffic.

Giuseppe Verdi died in Milan in January 1901.

