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## **Verdi Onstage in the United States: Ernani**

George Whitney Martin

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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**Verdi Onstage in the United States**

*Ernani*

George Martin

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When an Italian Opera Company, based in Havana, came on tour to the United States in April 1847, it surpassed all expectations. It not only at once set higher standards for vocal and instrumental performance but on opening night had a triumph with new music, the U.S. premiere of Verdi's *Ernani* (1844). The company was the creation of the immensely rich Martyr Torrens, who had used his fortune (based on a monopoly of the sale of fish in Cuba) to build an opera house in Havana, the opulent Gran Teatro de Tacón, and to staff it with Italian artists. In the summers of 1837 and 1842 he had sent his company on short visits to New Orleans, and in 1843 on tour to seven of the country's southern and eastern cities.<sup>1</sup> Now, four years later, on 13 April it came greatly strengthened in singers, orchestra, and chorus, so that upon landing in New York after ten days at sea, its roster tallied seventy-three,<sup>2</sup> with at least ten more soon added. In addition to soloists and a small nonmusical staff, the company included two artistic leaders on the brink of fame (violinist Luigi Arditi and double bassist Giovanni Bottesini), an orchestra of thirty-two (later sometimes swollen by local recruits), and a small but highly proficient chorus of twenty (four sopranos, three altos, six tenors, and seven basses).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it brought its own scenery and a wardrobe of costumes that the *New York Herald* reported to be "worth \$30,000."<sup>4</sup> On opening night, at the city's venerable Park Theatre (cap. 2,300; on Park Row, facing City Hall Park), it proved itself the most complete, best opera company yet to play in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Teasing New Yorkers, it gave only two performances of opera, on 15 and 16 April, and a subsequent concert before departing for a six-week season in Boston. For both staged performances in New York it offered *Ernani*, Verdi's fifth opera but only the second to reach the United States. Six weeks earlier, in a much smaller theater, a local company had produced his fourth, *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (1843). But whereas the latter's success had been moderate and slow,<sup>6</sup> that of *Ernani* was stupendous and instant. A young Manhattan lawyer, George [End Page 171] Templeton Strong, failing to get into the second performance, noted in his diary: "House an entire jam; no seats to be had at any price."<sup>7</sup> And he had to wait till June for the company's return.

Opening in Boston's Howard Athenaeum Theatre with *Ernani* on 23 April, the company subsequently presented Verdi's *I Lombardi* and *I due Foscari* (U.S. premiere), Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix*, Pacini's *Saffo*, Bellini's *Norma* and *I Capuleti ed i Montecchi*, and, once onstage and once in concert, Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto*. Of them all, *Ernani* roused the greatest excitement.<sup>8</sup>

Six years later, the critic for the *Boston Evening Gazette*, William W. Clapp Jr., summarized the importance to Boston's musical life of those *Ernani* performances:

It was on this occasion that Boston first recognized genuine Italian Opera. . . . A superb orchestra led by Arditi and the superlative contrabassist Bottesini, with a good chorus and principals of extraordinary merit, presented Verdi's best opera in a style that absolutely electrified the audience. All the recollections of English opera<sup>9</sup> were effaced by this life-breathing, passionate, and effective performance, and from that hour a new ideal of excellence in operatic affairs became fixed and irrevocable. Such a combination of brilliancy, effect, and vigor, with the sentimental and tender, had never before revealed itself upon the Boston lyric stage, and the excitement produced by this new sensation was commensurate with the marvels that produced it.

The opera itself was interesting from a wild and romantic plot, worked up in a good libretto, and that innate beauty...

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# Verdi Onstage in the United States

## *Ernani*

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G E O R G E M A R T I N

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