

relation to their collaborations: *Alzira* (1845), *La battaglia di Legnano* and *Luisa Miller* (1849). There were also two other projects *L'assedio di Firenze* (1849) and *Re Lear* (1850). Verdi persevered with the second until his final years. But the most important letters deal with their greatest collaboration, *Il trovatore* (1853).

Salvadore Cammarano (1801-1852) was the most important and celebrated Italian librettist of his day. As the official poet and stage director at the Royal Theatres at Naples, he staged operas and provided librettos for seven works by Donizetti (most famously, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Roberto Devereux*), and successful operas by Mercadante and Pacini. Julian Budden writes that "no librettist showed a greater flair for precipitating the atmosphere of a scene through a carefully constructed nucleus of words... For a composer who attached increasing importance to the 'parola scenica', the advantages of such a collaborator were obvious. Above all, Cammarano was not afraid of unusual subjects... What Verdi seems to have overlooked is that Cammarano's skill lay precisely in bringing all such plots within the pale of the contemporary operatic convention" (*The Operas of Verdi*, ii. 60). Cammarano was a consummate craftsman and theatrical operator, able to assist Verdi in the initially hostile environment of the Neapolitan opera houses, but he produced conservative libretti in the "number opera" tradition, with cavatinas, cabalettas, tripartite duets, formal ensembles and choral introductions (much disliked by the composer). Verdi's great achievement in *Il trovatore* is to transform Cammarano's conservative structures into a new, flexible type of dramatic opera: THESE LETTERS EMPHATICALLY DOCUMENT THIS TRANSFORMATION.

Verdi's progress from writer subservient to the opera-house and beholden to the librettist, to the master of the subject and in control of the text is amply documented in these letters. Verdi begins politely and solicitously, asking the librettist for ideas for operatic subjects (Letter 1, November 1844, about *Alzira*), later praising the poetry for two numbers in Act 2: "How beautiful they are! You succeeded excellently in the poetry. How will I make out in the music? [Letter 5, May 1845, translation]". Verdi's main concern was that Cammarano should devise characters suitable for the available singers, expressing hope that the great soprano Eugenia Tadolini be engaged. In the event, Tadolini was not available, but Verdi remained committed to the contract with Naples and the antiquated plot chosen by Cammarano (from Voltaire's *Alzire*), which the librettist dressed up in the operatic forms he had used for Donizetti, Pacini and Mercadante.

The extent of Verdi's transformation can be judged from the letters in 1851 about *Il trovatore*. Choice of subject has become all-important, Verdi seizing the initiative, finding a play in Spanish and translating it himself with a dictionary borrowed from Ricordi. Cammarano never found the subject congenial, and feared correctly it would fall foul of the Neapolitan censors. Verdi always had the greatest of enthusiasm for it and foisted it upon his librettist, ceaselessly badgering him for draft sections, and ultimately redesigning whole scenes ("Well here is *Il trovatore*, translated by someone who knows not a word of Spanish with only a basic dictionary to go by. In truth it is more divined than translated; anyway I think that the sense of it is there and, with your great imagination, you will be able to make up for what is lacking in this translation [Letter 27, February 1851, translation]").

This dramatic fire and determination also informs Verdi's letters in 1850 about *King Lear*, a subject that could have joined the canon of Shakespeare operas with *Macbeth*, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, but which remained one of the great "might

have beens" of Italian opera. Verdi cast around for well over a decade trying to find a suitable librettist for *Re Lear*, and felt that Cammarano measured up to the challenge. The composer drafted a long scenario at the end of February 1850, which has hitherto assumed to be complete, albeit lacking (as Mossa puts it) a signature or any sign of its dispatch. The letters contain Verdi's peroration added to the end of the scenario fervently recommending the project to the librettist, fully aware of the magnitude of the task: "The alarming thing is the yawning chasm between Shakespeare's colossal play and my miserable sketch. There everything is great, here everything seems puny in comparison. But who knows if you will not create miracles with your poetry? Courage then! Once we have the edifice designed, making it as grand as we possibly can, let us gird our loins and you with the poetry and I with the music, we will raise it as high as we possibly can [Letter 23, February/March 1850, translation]".

The letters illustrate Verdi's steps along this journey towards his ideal Italian opera as he becomes increasingly explicit about his intentions. Everything is bent to the purpose of realising his dramatic vision. Verdi writes outlines for scenes and poetical drafts (Letter 10, about *La battaglia di Legnano*, November 1848). Only then does he consider where the opera might best be performed, dictated by the availability of suitable and sympathetic singers. In *Luisa Miller*, he wished to develop several of the characters Cammarano regarded as merely secondary, to create convincing dramatic foils to the heroine. To achieve this Verdi sought additional numbers, a recitative here, a single-movement duet there, adding eight or ten lines for the antagonists, even suggesting text himself ("...If Walter is not a leading character, prominent, I think the whole plot with suffer. What becomes of the infernal intrigue thought up by Walter and Wurm, on which the whole drama is based, if its exposition is outlined just by two minor characters? How will the important Act 1 Finale work if Walter is not a prominent part?... Before the final section, it would be best to add two lines for Luisa, the sense of which should be 'No, no, I love only Wurm', and then write not more than six lines for each of the characters [in the quartet], where they all express their differing emotions as asides...[Letters 15, 16 and 20, translations]").

By the time of their final collaboration, *Il trovatore*, Verdi had become frustrated with the restriction of Cammarano's insistence on outmoded musical forms, arias, duets and ensembles, and was unsparing in his criticism which he delivered with fire and venom, notably in the original conception for the end of Act 2, when Leonora retires to a convent:

"If only you had written a brief simple Recitative for the Troubadour [Manrico] and Ruiz, an entrance aria for the Count (before or after, it doesn't matter), an off-stage chorus of the nuns in the background throughout, and combined this (to create contrast) with a verse for Leonora off-stage, where she recalls her love or something, etc, then one for the Troubadour on-stage, another for the Count (so as to make an ensemble), etc, etc. After this Leonora appears from the church with her attendant nuns, passing by the Troubadour, who lifts his visor—'I'm not imagining it!... it's him'—The Count to his followers:—'Now let's seize the moment!... courage!'—The Troubadour. 'Come away with your Manrico'. Everyone falls to the ground. 'Il Trovatore!!' That's how this scene would have had more character, and above all more originality... [Letter 31, September 1851, translation]"

Problems with the Naples management made it necessary for some of the Verdi/Cammarano operas to be premiered elsewhere (*Luisa Miller* was in fact Verdi's last for Naples).