GIUSEPPE VERDI
OTELLO
Otello

A glimpse into the Archivio Storico Ricordi
At an international media company like Bertelsmann, the ideas and creativity of our artists, writers and journalists form the heart of our value creation. They are the ones who constantly reinvent our offers by continuing to tell new stories, every day, that inform, entertain and inspire people.

In this booklet, we tell you the story of Verdi’s Otello. To paint a complete picture, we delved deep into the treasure trove of the world-famous Ricordi Archive.

Like Verdi, Ricordi is a name of great resonance – in Italy, throughout the music world, and also at Bertelsmann. The Archivio Storico Ricordi in Milan, which provides near complete documentation of the rise of the music publisher Casa Ricordi and today gives us unique insights into the world of opera, is regarded as the most important privately owned collection of Italian opera history. Bertelsmann acquired Casa Ricordi in 1994, but later relinquished most of the company again. However, the associated Archivio Storico Ricordi remained part of Bertelsmann. For us, the extraordinary scope of the collection and its outstanding importance for the history of Italian opera were more than reason enough to safeguard the many thousands of scores, libretti, letters, and photographs and preserve them for posterity.

In Verdi Year 2013, we began to present the documents from the Archivio Storico Ricordi in a new form and make them accessible to all; whether in the form of international exhibitions, publications, or by digitally recording the exhibits. What’s more, for several years we have been increasingly involved in other areas of cultural history as well. Bertelsmann was the key sponsor of the digital restoration of the classic silent movies “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” (Robert Wiene) and “Destiny” (Fritz Lang), thereby sending a signal for the preservation of cinematic heritage in the digital media age.

We will continue to help shape the future of digital media in the years ahead. Meanwhile, we will also continue our work to preserve the history of media for future generations and make it accessible to as many people as possible.

In this spirit, I am delighted by your interest and wish you an enjoyable read!

Dr. Thomas Rabe
Chairman and CEO of Bertelsmann

Cover — External view of the castle, Act I, copy of a set design by Giovanni Zuccarelli (1846-1897), new production, Rome, Teatro Costanzi, 1887, detail
Foreword

by Plácido Domingo

I have never felt closer to the spirit of Giuseppe Verdi than when I first visited at the end of 2014 the Archivio Storico Ricordi at the Braidense National Library in Milan and held Verdi’s manuscripts in my hands. As President of Europa Nostra, the European Heritage Federation, I am proud that Bertelsmann, one of our main corporate partners, has taken it up itself to restore and protect these unique testimonies of Europe’s musical heritage. As a musician I was simply overcome by joy and emotion.

Among the many treasures of the Archivio Ricordi are letters, various editions of librettos and published scores, set and costumes designs, drawings and photographs concerning Verdi’s masterpiece Otello. Verdi was in his seventies when he wrote this opera, perfect proof that unstoppable creativity and productivity are not exclusively the realm of the youth.

Otello has become my favourite role since I first sang it over 40 years ago. I must have played the title role at least 200 times. I fondly remember so many performances, including Franco Zeffirelli’s feature film, with music conducted by the unforgettable Lorin Maazel. Dio! mi potevi scagliar, from the third act, shows a man who has lost everything, who is past hope and beyond desperation. In art, one can regularly experience that great moment when the magic takes over. It happened to me several times when I was singing Otello’s Monologue. I completely forgot that I was singing, the music and the words just took over. During that magical moment, I simply was Otello. It is the great gift of music that almost 130 year since its premiere, Otello still evokes such passionate feelings, not only in the performers but also in the large audiences across the world. His story is as relevant today as it was in the time of Shakespeare or in the time of Verdi.

You can therefore understand how exciting it is for me that now, for the first time, Giuseppe Verdi’s manuscripts, Arrigo Boito’s libretto as well as Alfredo Edel’s original drawings of the wonderful costumes and set designs, can be seen in Spain, in my hometown Madrid. This exceptional exhibition made possible thanks to Bertelsmann constitutes a marvelous highlight during the celebration of the 200th Anniversary of Teatro Real, where Otello has been performed so many times.

I am convinced that visitors will be enchanted by the discovery of these beautiful and moving historical documents which form part of Europe’s opera heritage.

Maestro Plácido Domingo
President of Europa Nostra
Special issue of the periodical Illustrazione Italiana, dedicated to the premiere of Otello, 1887

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), photograph by anonymous

1 — Special issue of the periodical Illustrazione Italiana, dedicated to the premiere of Otello, 1887

2 — Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), photograph by anonymous
A Late, Triumphant Masterpiece

by Gabriele Dotto

Few opera premieres have been as anxiously anticipated as Verdi’s Otello at Milan’s Teatro alla Scala on 5 February 1887. And few people at the time would even have imagined that the Maestro—who had stated his wish to “retire from the stage” after Aida, a decade and a half earlier, and who was by then in his seventies—could have been tempted to undertake such an ambitious project.

The background is a familiar part of the Verdi biography: how his publisher Giulio Ricordi maneuvered, in late summer of 1879 (with the help of conductor Franco Faccio and the librettist and composer Arrigo Boito), to convince the Grand Old Man to come out of retirement with the idea of embracing one of the greatest texts of his beloved Shakespeare, at first broaching the subject during a lunch, then a day later producing a complete outline of Boito’s libretto (opportune already drafted!), which Verdi judged to be good. “Go ahead and write the libretto” Verdi told Boito, “it will always be useful for you, for me, or for someone else”. By degrees, Verdi allowed himself, always grumbling, never letting down his guard, to be won over to the idea. Nonetheless, he did so with the full understanding that this would be one of the most difficult and risky challenges of his entire, glorious career. Boito carried on completing the first draft of the libretto, consigning the last of it to Verdi by mid November. Ricordi, worried that Verdi might change his mind, pressured Boito to finish the draft; in a delightful letter dated 21 September 1879, Boito wrote to a Ricordi administrator “If this week I do not give Giulio a strangled Desdemona [i.e., the final scene of the opera], I fear he will strangle me.” (see image 3). Over the next few years the two artists engaged in an extended and complicated process of revision of the text. As for the music, however, notwithstanding the optimistic reports of Verdi’s student Emanuele Muzio to Ricordi in early 1880 that “Regarding Otello, Verdi told me he has already begun setting it to music” and, a year later, that “he will dedicate himself completely to Otello, the music of which I believe to be foremost in his mind” it seems instead Verdi was proceeding with cautious care. As the historian James Hepokoski has observed, “Verdi’s work in the intervening years—two sets
of extensive and important opera revisions, for
Simon Boccanegra (in 1881, with Boito) and for
Don Carlos (in 1882-83, with Camile Du Locle)
—may be understood as the composer’s grap-
plings with the advanced style that he planned
to use in Otello. The revisions were moderately
risk-free experiments for the new style as well
as opportunities to judge the critical response
to it: a gearing-up for the Otello project. And
yet, even during the revision of Don Carlos the
initial stages of the composition of Otello may
have been taking shape.” It would not be until
December 1884 that Verdi again took up work-
ning on setting Otello, this time in earnest.

In adapting the Shakespeare play into an
effective opera libretto, the greatest chal-
lenge facing both the librettist and the com-
poser was to find the most effective way to
transform a masterpiece conceived for spoken
theatre— with its different rules of dramatic
timing, its natural emphasis on extensive dia-
logue— into theatre in music, with its need for
moments of synoptic narrative exposition, its
musical rendition of emotion and motivation,
and its numerous passages of “suspended
time” in which characters express their inner
thoughts. While respecting the overall struc-
ture of Otello, Boito created a more complex
role for Jago and scenes of intensified high
drama for Otello. Among the strikingly original
contributions Boito made to the Shakespear-
ian original was the ingenious, cynical “evil
Credo” that depicted a much more complex
characterization of Iago and his “satanic”
nature. The correspondence between Boito
and Verdi provides wonderful insight into the
creative minds of these two superb artists.

At one point Boito wrote:
Otello is like a man moving in a nightmare,
and under the fatal, mounting domination
of this nightmare he thinks, acts, moves,
suffers, and commits his dreadful crime.
Everyone knows [Shakespeare’s] Othello is a
very great masterpiece and, in its greatness,
perfect. This perfection derives (as you know
better than I) from the prodigious harmony
of the whole and of the details, from the pro-
found analytical portrayal of the characters,
from that very rigorous and inevitable logic
that unfolds all the events of the tragedy, from
the way all passions involved are observed and
portrayed, especially the dominant passion.
All these virtues concur to make Othello a
masterpiece of art. To retouch, even in just
one place, a work of such beauty and wis-
dom cannot be done without diminishing its
perfection. But an opera is not a play; our art
lives on elements unknown to spoken tragedy.
The destroyed atmosphere can be created
anew. Eight measures can suffice to revive
a feeling; a rhythm can restore a character.
Music is the most omnipotent of the arts, it has
a logic of its own, more rapid, more free than the
logic of spoken thought and far more eloquent.
Verdi, meanwhile, constantly commented on
the work of his librettist and urged him on, as
in this letter:
Very, very good the Finale. What a difference
between this one and the first! It is so true
that Otello, mute, is greater and more terrify-
ing, that I would be of a mind not to have him
speak at all during the whole ensemble num-
ber. It seems to me that Iago alone can say, and
more briefly, everything the spectator needs to
know without Otello replying. After the ensemble and after the words “All flee from Otello”, it seems to me that Otello does not speak and shout enough. He is silent for four verses and it seems to me (from a theatrical viewpoint) that after the phrase “That robs him of all feeling” Otello should shout one or two verses... “Flee. I loathe you, myself, the whole world...” And it also seems to me that some verses could be spared when Otello and Iago remain alone. A choked cry on the word “handkerchief” seems to me more terrible than a cry on a commonplace exclamation like “O Satan”. The words “fainted”, “immobile”, “mute” arrest the action a bit. One thinks, one reflects, whereas here the thing is to end rapidly. Tell me your opinion. I haven’t finished!! The chorus has little action, or rather none at all. Couldn’t a way be found to move it a bit?
The project inspired Verdi to new, wonderful heights: his Otello remains one of the great masterpieces of all the opera repertoire.

The work of composer and librettist accelerated, becoming increasingly intense. Finally, in late December 1886, after learning that the last pages of the score of Otello had been definitively consigned to the publisher Ricordi, Boito wrote to the composer with this congratulatory phrase: “The grand dream has become reality”. But he added: “What a pity!” We can understand why: although on the one hand, that concluding “act of passage” marked the satisfying attainment of the project’s completion, on the other it signaled the end of many months of a creative rush. Of course, this was not a painting, or a building, or a novel — that is, it was not a creation presented in a form directly accessible as “the artwork itself”. It was an opera lirica, art to be performed. Verdi’s score was the “blueprint” from which to shape that performance: the ultimate “artwork” would be the living, breathing realization of that orchestral score. A great deal of detail work and effort still remained to be done before (and even after) the premiere, during which further adjustments, fine tuning, or even important changes would be made to the musical text. Verdi would still have occasion to take his autograph score into his hand again. Nonetheless, when the score was consigned to the publisher, the fundamental shaping of the artistic concept had been established. And with that, the collaborative effort of composer and librettist—the engaging, sometimes frustrating, often exhilarating months of sometimes slow, sometimes feverish work—had come to an end. For the seventy-three-year-old composer, who for months had felt the adrenaline thrill of creating for the stage again, the satisfaction of completion was almost certainly accompanied by a touch of melancholy. Now “Otello is” wrote Boito understandingly—“The Moor will no longer come knocking at the door.”

Though the creation of the opera’s score was complete at this point, preparations for the premiere were just getting under way. And in this, the publisher Ricordi played a fundamental role. Verdi consigned his completed score in sections, and the publisher worked

5 — Giulio Ricordi (1840-1912), photograph by Varischi & Artico, Milan
frenetically because it planned to issue a vocal score immediately after the opera’s premiere. A few days after receipt of Act 4, Giulio reported to Verdi that the Ricordi production staff had surpassed themselves in their efforts: *Even that lazy and sardonic tribe, the music copyists, perked up when they saw a Verdi score arrive!!...* Everyone is in a good mood: some remember having prepared the first copy of Aida, some the copy of the Requiem, yet others of Ballo in maschera, and so on!!... In other words, in four days they have completed: the master copy of the full score, the voice-part model for the vocal score transcriber, Desdemona’s rehearsal part, and the individual orchestral string parts!!... I was astonished.

and just a few days later, Michele Saladino had completed the piano reduction for the vocal score of that act. Further, Ricordi’s role was not confined to publishing the music. Throughout the nineteenth century, the visual aspects of opera production—sets, costumes, staging—were the responsibility of contracted impresarios who commissioned operas and programmed the seasons; later, this role was assumed by established theatre managements. For Otello, the Ricordi had no intention of leaving the supervision of the production to others. The Ricordi firm had a staff of outstanding artists and designers in its famous Graphic Arts division, and Giulio used their talents to the fullest. In close consultation with the composer and librettist, Ricordi had Alfredo Edel study the Venetian painters of the late 15th and early 16th centuries to prepare a series of nearly sixty historically accurate costume designs for the principal roles in Otello, along with every imaginable accessory and stage prop, even commissioning custom-designed cloth. Even the staging for Otello was carefully planned down to the smallest detail, and published in a manual (*disposizione scenica*) written by Giulio Ricordi himself. To ensure the quality of subsequent productions, copies of set and costume designs, as well as the production manual, were made available to other theatres. The printed Otello libretto also received special attention, as Ricordi agreed to have a specially devised three-column layout on two pages hand-bound into the first edition, to show a complex ensemble with several characters singing different texts simultaneously; a further testament to Ricordi’s exceptional commitment.

The Archivio Storico Ricordi, today housed in the Braidense Library of Milan, conserves an enormous amount of documentation for Otello, for the joy of interpreters and scholars: Verdi’s autograph full score, of course, but also contracts, correspondence, various editions of libretti and published scores, set and costumes designs, and more. A vast collection, which will continue to provide inspiration for new studies of the great masterpieces of Italian musical art.

*Gabriele Dotto is a musicologist expert in 19th and 20th-century Italian opera, Director of Scholar Initiatives of the Archivio Storico Ricordi, and current Director of the Michigan State University Press.*
In this fascinating document, Verdi — wishing to exercise complete control over the production of the opera — establishes strict conditions (and a large fine, if the conditions are not met) regarding the composer’s oversight, even to the point of allowing him to cancel the premiere after the dress rehearsal, if he was unsatisfied with the result.

6 — “Memorandum” from Giuseppe Verdi to Giulio Ricordi, autograph, folio 1.

7 — Desdemona, Act III, costume design by Alfredo Edel (1856-1912), world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

8 — The soprano Romilda Pantaleoni (1847-1917) who created the role of Desdemona, photograph by Pilotti & Payse, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

9 — Vanity table, Desdemona’s room, prop design by Carlo Ferrario (1833-1907), world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887
10 — Banners and flags, prop designs by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

11 — Ensign, Act III, costume design by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887
Montano, Act I, costume design by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

The great castle room, Act III, set design by Giovanni Zuccarelli, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887
A page from the mise-en-scène (“disposizione scenica”) by Giulio Ricordi for Otello, Act I, 1887.

Cassio, Act I, costume design by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887.
Otello, Act 1, costume design by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

Jago’s “Credo”, a text which Boito created for the opera, as set to music by Verdi; Act II, autograph score, 1887, folios 121v-122r
SCENA V DELL’ATTO II (DIREZIONE DI A. Bonamore)

O nella tua voce
Racconta a profondi il baluardo
Del mio speraroso farer che si desta.
18 — Scene V, Act II, sketch design by A. Bonamore. Special issue of the periodical Illustrazione Italiana, dedicated to the premiere of Otello, 1887

19 — Jago, Act I, costume design by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

20 — The baritone Victor Maurel (1848-1923) who created the role of Jago, photograph by anonymous, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

21 — Jago, costume design by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

22 — A ground-floor room in the castle...a large garden, Act II. Perforated foreground structure, with the painted flat of the garden in the rear, original model by Giovanni Zucarelli, 1887
Costume and prop designs by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

23 — Herald, Act III

24 — Hose and breeches

25 — Venetian Soldiers, Acts I and III

26 — Emilia, Act IV
27 — Desdemona, Act IV, costume design by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

28 — Otello, Act IV, costume design by Alfredo Edel, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887

29 — The tenor Francesco Tamagno (1848-1923) who created the role of Otello, photograph by anonymous, world premiere, La Scala, 5 February 1887
30 — Giuseppe Verdi and Francesco Tamagno who created the role of Otello, photograph by Pietro Tempestini, 1899

31 — Franco Faccio (1840-1891), conductor of the Otello premiere, photograph by Fratelli Vianelli, Venice

32 — Detail of the libretto with annotations by Giulio Ricordi about the audience’s reactions at the premiere of Otello by Giuseppe Verdi, 1887. The annotations read: “Wild applause | curtain-call for the singers | curtain-call for Verdi | curtain-call for Verdi and Boito | curtain-call for Verdi, Boito and Faccio | the same again | Verdi and Boito | Verdi alone | curtain-call for everyone | Verdi alone”

33 — Desdemona’s bedroom, copy of a set design by Giovanni Zuccarelli, new production, Rome, Teatro Costanzi, 1887
TUTTI

Afferratelo!

OTELLO

(slanziandosi per afferrare la spada)

E il ciel non ha più fulmini?!

LODOVICO

La spada a me!

OTELLO

Tant’osi?! - Niun mi tema

S’anco armato mi vede. Ecco la fine

Del mio cammin... Oh! Gloria! Otello fu.

(lascia cadere la spada)

(va presso al letto e contempla Desdemona)

E tu... come sei pallida! e stanca, e muta, e bella,

Pia creatura nata sotto maligna stella.

Fredda come la casta tua vita, e in cielo assorta.

Desdemona! Desdemona!... Ah!... morta!... morta!... morta!...

(estrando furtivamente dalle vesti un pugnale)

Ho un’arma ancor!

(sì ferisce)

CASSIO

Ah! Ferma!

TUTTI

Sciagurato!

OTELLO

Pria d’ucciderti... sposa... ti bacio.

Or morendo... nell’ombra... ov’io mi giacio...

Un bacio... un bacio ancora... un altro bacio...

(muore)
The Archivio Storico Ricordi: a Bertelsmann project

In 1808, Giovanni Ricordi founded a music publishing firm in Milan that would significantly shape the cultural history of Italy and Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries: Casa Ricordi. It published the works of the “big five” composers of Italian opera – Gioachino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti, Vincenzo Bellini, Giuseppe Verdi and Giacomo Puccini. From the beginning, all of the company’s documents were meticulously archived. The former business archives of the Casa Ricordi publishing company, which was acquired by Bertelsmann in 1994, have since become a historical archive: the Archivio Storico Ricordi, one of the world’s foremost privately held music collections, which is now housed in the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense in Milan.

The original scores of many operas of the 19th and early 20th century stored here, along with those of many other compositions, are highlights of European music history. In 2006, Bertelsmann sold its former music rights business to Universal, but retained the rights to the Ricordi brand and the publisher’s famous archives. The Archivio Storico Ricordi is under the special protection of the Italian Ministry of Culture. As a national heritage, the Archivio must remain in Italy.

After having been an integral part of Casa Ricordi for decades and being used primarily for commercial purposes such as the publication of “critical editions,” the archive has recently been undergoing an accelerated transformation into a historical research archive.

Since February 2011, a project group at Bertelsmann and the Ricordi team in Milan have been developing a sustainable concept for indexing the archival material and preserving it for posterity. Together, they are working on the continuous restoration and digitization of the archive. The idea is to develop the Archivio Storico Ricordi into a best-practice case in the field of communicating cultural and historical archive materials in the digital era, and to make its resources accessible to a wider audience besides the academic community.

Bertelsmann is aware of the great responsibility associated with owning this unique cultural asset, and continues to cultivate the tradition associated with the Ricordi name.

Bertelsmann is a media, services and education company that operates in about 50 countries around the world. It includes the broadcaster RTL Group, the trade book publisher Penguin Random House, the magazine publisher Gruner + Jahr, the music company BMG, the service provider Arvato, the Bertelsmann Printing Group, the Bertelsmann Education Group, and Bertelsmann Investments, an international network of funds. The company has 117,000 employees and generated revenues of €17.1 billion in the 2015 financial year. Bertelsmann stands for creativity and entrepreneurship. This combination promotes first-class media content and innovative service solutions that inspire customers around the world.
Publishing Credits

Publisher:
Bertelsmann SE & Co. KGaA
Corporate Communications
Carl-Bertelsmann-Strasse 270
33311 Gütersloh
Germany

Concept and contents: Gabriele Dotto
Iconographic research: Maria Pia Ferraris
Design: Alessandro Marchesi
Printing: Alef de Bronce

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