

The Verdi Trail

IN HIS BIRTHDAY YEAR, ALBERTH EHRNROOTH DISCOVERS THE LAND THAT VERDI KNEW, LOVED AND TILLED IN HIS OLD AGE

“**A**las. I was born in a poor village. I hadn't the means of acquiring any education; they put a wretched spinet under my hands and in time I started writing notes... notes upon notes.”

These were Giuseppe Verdi's own words in a letter written towards the end of his life. It is hard to deny that Verdi's early life was spent in fairly humble circumstances, but he didn't derive from peasant stock as he claimed. There is also no doubt that he received a decent education and his father was most certainly not illiterate; another myth that biographers like to repeat.

I decided to see the evidence for myself with the help of the very knowledgeable guide Melanie Schoonhoven. Our destination was what is virtually a Verdi open-air museum in and around the town of Busseto in the Province of Parma.

A light fog has descended upon the open fields as we approach Busseto from Parma by car. Through a misty grey filter this verdant landscape can appear dull, but in the lowlands the skies tend to provide the drama. The next day the weather clears up and the Apennine mountains make a surprising appearance on the Western horizon.

This is productive agricultural country and the few trees that dot the landscape are here for a reason: they can grant shade to livestock on a sizzling summer day.

I am told that the plains of the Po Valley are quite susceptible to sudden spells of winter chill. And a morning's promise of

summer magic can by the afternoon turn into a muggy portal to hell. This is as close to heaven for a mosquito, as La Scala is paradise (or Elysium) on earth for opera tragi-comics. Why then, you may ask, was Verdi so keen to return to his native stomping grounds after his first big success with *Nabucco*?

The first stop on this pilgrimage is the Casa Natale Di Verdi in the centre of the village Le Roncole. Giuseppe was born here on the 10th of October 1813. Father Carlo ran an *osteria* (tavern) and a grocery store from the same modest but spacious dwelling. The winter stable next to the living area must have produced quite a pungent smell. It is a shame that Verdi's birth house, which is a national treasure, displays furniture that is more reminiscent of IKEA than a rustic inn.

The church of St. Michael the Archangel is a stone's throw away. In its belfry Verdi's mother took refuge with Peppino, as the boy was nicknamed, when the marauding Austrian troops swept through the village after the defeat of Napoleon. Giuseppe was baptized in this charming church and learnt to play on its small organ, which is still *in situ*.

At this point you could take off your boots and, just like the young Peppino, walk barefoot the five kilometres to Busseto (Verdi told a biographer that he did this regularly to save the soles of his shoes).

From the age of ten he attended school in Busseto, returning home only on Sundays and holidays. Today it is a rather sleepy town where Verdi is the main attraction – but it





Busseto's Rocca
and statue of Verdi



Sant'Agata's
Villa Verdi



Verdi's
Casa Natale

must have been thriving in the 19th century. The wealthy local merchant Antonio Barezzi became Verdi's benefactor. His daughter Margherita was taught the rudiments of the keyboard and wooed by the young composer.

We visit the elegant Barezzi house just off the market square and even though many rooms have been altered since Verdi's time the surprisingly large salon, where the local Philharmonic Society regularly gave concerts, hasn't changed much. I am encouraged to play the grand piano on which Verdi composed the opera *I Due Foscari*, but decline out of respect for the composer. But I can't resist stroking the ivories imagining how the hands of Giuseppe and his future wife Margharita first met on these keys. There is a small but fascinating exhibition with the earliest known portrait of Verdi and a patriotic appeal for donations to buy weapons, which the composer evidently supported very generously.

Verdi moved to Milan as a 19-year old, returned for brief periods and quite unexpectedly settled in 1849 in Palazzo Orlandi across the road from Casa Barezzi. The grey neoclassical building was for sale when I visited and the museum has closed. Here Verdi composed *Rigoletto* and *Luisa Miller* but was treated appallingly by some citizens who

accused him of living in sin with Giuseppina Strepponi, which was effectively what he was doing. This explains why he refused blankly when Busseto's municipality asked him to compose an opera for the theatre being built in his honour. The irony is that he donated a princely sum towards its construction yet never set foot inside the edifice!

“THE VERDIS PLANTED MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED DIFFERENT SPECIES OF TREES”

The sumptuously decorated 300-seat Teatro Giuseppe Verdi is built within the Rocca which, on the outside, retains some hallmarks of the 13th century fortress it once was.

Next door is the hotel *I Due Foscari*, which happens to be owned by the outstanding Verdian tenor Carlo Bergonzi. Time has stood still in the establishment now run by Carlo's son Marco, but the restaurant is excellent.

Villa Verdi in Sant'Agata, where Verdi lived for nearly half a century, forms the highlight of my visit. Verdi bought some land with a

farmhouse that he enlarged and improved with luxuries like underfloor heating, also adding a chapel where Mass could be held.

The Verdis were enthusiastic gardeners and they planted more than one hundred different species of trees. A lake was dug so that they could make ice. The Carrara-Verdi family still own the property and therefore only five rooms are open to the public. Giuseppe and Giuseppina had separate, but adjoining bedrooms because Verdi often worked at night. I am tempted to sit on the *Aida* chair at the writing desk where Verdi created most of his works; he rarely used the piano to compose. I spot the volumes of his favourite authors, Shakespeare and Schiller, and many pictures and sculptures of people he admired. My guide Melanie reveals that he slept in a more or less upright position, which explains the rather short bed for a tall man. The rooms are cluttered with relics, letters and scores (including an annotated score of *Lohengrin!*), but it feels intimate and genuine.

Rather odd is the final exhibit, which contains the furniture from room 157 of the Grand Hotel in Milan (see box). This slightly morbid recreation shows the nightgown, the linen and the bed that Giuseppe Verdi died in on January 27, 1901, at the age of 87. ●



Verdian Things To Do In Milan

There is no more Verdian venue than Teatro Alla Scala. The 2013-14 season has been severely streamlined due to the financial crisis, but three Verdi operas have made the cut. La Scala's museum has pictures related to Verdi and there are plenty of relics including the maestro's funeral mask.

The Casa di Riposo is a hospice for musicians set up and paid for by the maestro. The courtyard is open to the public and there you will find the gloriously decorated chapel with Giuseppe and Giuseppina's graves.

At the end of his life Verdi lived at the Grand Hotel, located only a few hundred metres from La Scala. Daniel Barenboim occupies the suite when he is in town, but otherwise you can ask to have a peek.

