

Chapter Title: Music Journalism in Early Victorian London

Book Title: Verdi in Victorian London

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Published by: Open Book Publishers

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1d41d0q.6>

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I. Music Journalism in Early Victorian London

To describe the conditions of music journalism in Victorian London and define the manner in which Verdi's operas were conceptualised by those critics who attended and reviewed their productions week after week for almost sixty years represents an overwhelming task. Although individual responses can be fruitfully investigated and certain shared tendencies noted, broader generalisations are almost impossible. In Victorian times, around 200 periodicals provided well-informed coverage of music and musical events.¹ Moreover, music journalism underwent a transformation of paramount importance during this period, which involved the rise in the socio-cultural status of journalists and the advance of music criticism from the literary gentlemanly amateurism of an earlier age to a more solid professionalism.² However, by 1850 the coverage of music was still uneven in quality and, to make things more complicated, by the end of the century music critics were still publishing anonymously, with one individual often contributing to many different journals.

Four periodicals have particular relevance for this investigation, since they gave uninterrupted coverage to music and musical events between the years 1845 and 1894: *The Athenaeum*, *The Musical World*, *The Times* and *The Musical Times*.

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- 1 Leanne Langley, "The Musical Press in Nineteenth-Century England," *Notes* 46/3, Second Series (1990), pp. 583–92.
 - 2 Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance and the Press 1850–1914: Watchmen of Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 2–9.

The Athenaeum and Literary Chronicle was one of the most prominent journals in Victorian London. Launched in 1828 by James Silk Buckingham and Henry Colburn, it ran until 1923 and dominated the weekly periodical market; it was considered “an outstanding popular literary journal with mildly liberal principles.”³ Although a literary journal, in January 1834 it assigned a dedicated space to music in the “Music and the Drama” columns. There, Henry Fothergill Chorley, who had joined *The Athenaeum* in 1833, shot his merciless darts. Chorley ruled supreme as the mouthpiece of the journal from the mid-1840s to 1868. A short description of his conspicuous figure has been left by the English writer, politician and *Punch* contributor Rudolph Chambers Lehmann in his *Memories*:

Of Henry Fothergill Chorley I have a very distinct recollection, though he died thirty-six years ago. He was tall and thin. His eyes blinked and twinkled as he spoke; and his quaint packing gestures and high staccato voice made an impression which caused one of his friends to describe him as the missing link between the chimpanzee and the cockatoo.⁴

Chorley was one of the most influential music critics of his time and was regarded as the most severe, conservative and uncompromising of them all.⁵ He disliked Robert Schumann’s music and favoured Mendelssohn’s, and he was said to have neither the natural gifts nor the education necessary for such a responsible position since, as Lehmann put it, “he took the most violent likes and dislikes; an important matter, seeing that he, so to speak, made public opinion.”⁶

As Henry Gay Hewlett was already suggesting in 1873, Chorley’s music education was qualified by a tint of amateurism;⁷ he nurtured and developed his fervour for music in Liverpool in the 1830s thanks to his intimate friendship with the poetess Felicia Hemans (1793–1835),

3 Theodor Fenner, *Opera in London: Views of the Press; 1785–1830* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 45.

4 Rudolph Chambers Lehmann (comp. and ed.), *Memories of Half a Century: a Record of Friendships* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1908), p. 230.

5 Robert Terrell Bledsoe, *Henry Fothergill Chorley Victorian Journalist* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p. 44.

6 Lehmann, *Memories*, p. 228.

7 Henry Gay Hewlett (comp.), *Henry Fothergill Chorley: Autobiography, Memoirs and Letters* (London: Bentley, 1873), 1: 82–85.

to whom Chorley would dedicate a biographic essay in 1836.⁸ James Z. Hermann, alias Jakob Zeugheer Hermann, conductor of the Liverpool Philharmonic, was his only music teacher; his attendance of the symphonic concerts in Liverpool, together with the composition of small lyric works on texts by Felicia Hemans herself, provided Chorley with the credentials and qualifications necessary to his future career as a critic.

That he was gifted with a singularly acute ear and retentive memory; that, thanks to his Liverpool teachers, his passionate love of the art was based upon a sound knowledge of the science of music; and that he had acquired a familiarity with the works of its greatest masters that was wide if not profound, are facts about which there can be no dispute. To one thus endowed and informed, a regular course of attendance during several months of the year at the choicest performances of sacred and secular music in London, must of itself have constituted a professional education of no ordinary value.⁹

In addition to its strong tint of conservatism, Chorley's career was characterised by an equally strong commitment to the ethics of art, literature and journalism:

The whole tenor of his critical career, so far as I have been able to follow it, seems pervaded, and consecrated by a single aim. That Art should be true to herself, her purpose high, her practice stainless, was a creed which he never wearied of preaching. Against any tradition of the past, or innovation of the present, that savoured of falsehood or trick; against all pretenders, who concealed their nakedness by meretricious display or arrogant self-assertion, he ceaselessly protested and inveighed. Alike to the bribery of managers, the venality of journalists and claqueurs, the extravagant assumption of composers, and the insolent vanity of singers and instrumentalists, he showed himself a bitter, almost a remorseless, enemy.¹⁰

During his lifelong career as a critic Chorley came to be accepted by the best musicians of England and Europe as a thoroughly competent authority, listened to by amateurs with more deference than any other contemporary critic. "In many houses, it has been said, *The Athenaeum*

8 Henry Fothergill Chorley, *Memorials of Mrs. Hemans: With Illustrations of her Literary Character from her Private Correspondence* (New York: Sanders & Otley, 1836).

9 Hewlett, *Henry Fothergill Chorley*, 1: 282–83.

10 *Ibid.*, 289–90.

was habitually read solely for the sake of its musical column."¹¹ However, the extent to which Chorley's criticism could really affect both the general public and the professional musician appears to be problematic, owing to the often excessive quality of his opinions.¹²

In 1830 Charles Wentworth Dilke assumed the editorship of *The Athenaeum*, his involvement with the journal having begun already in the late 1820s.¹³ Dilke was strongly committed to the cause of independent journalism and refused to practice puffery, a principle that dovetailed nicely with Chorley's strong sense of professionalism. On this account, Dilke's *Athenaeum* was regarded as a journal of integrity. Upon Chorley's retirement in 1868, it continued to select its music critics on the basis of their competence and experience in the field.¹⁴ Although in the 1870s it developed a more open attitude towards the newest musical ideas and a more lenient position regarding Richard Wagner, it remained a journal of strongly conservative opinions throughout the century.

As suggested by Richard Kitson, *The Musical World* was possibly the only British music journal comparable in quality and authoritativeness to *La Revue et Gazette musicale* (1835–1880), *Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (1834–1909) and the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* (1842–1902). Founded by the well-known music publisher Joseph Alfred Novello, it was printed weekly in London from 18 March 1836 to 24 January 1891 and was entirely devoted to music.¹⁵ In 1839, George Alexander Macfarren (1813–1887) took over its editorship. In 1840, Alfred Day (1810–1849) was entrusted with the position of music critic but, his "laconical bitterness" having dissatisfied the editor, James William Davison (1813–1885) was soon asked to take over the role.¹⁶ In 1844 Davison himself announced an important shift; he assumed half proprietorship of the journal and

11 *Ibid.*, 184.

12 *Ibid.*, 196.

13 Laurel Brake, Marysa Demoor, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Gent: Academy Press, 2009), p. 169.

14 Chorley was followed by Campbell Clarke (1868–1870), Charles L. Gruneisen (1870–1879), Ebenezer Prout (1879–1888), Henry F. Frost (1888–1898) John S. Shedlock (1898–1916). See also chapter 18.

15 Richard Kitson, *The Musical World, 1836–1865*, 11 vols. Répertoire International de la Presse Musicale (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), I: ix–xix.

16 Patricia Collins Jones, "Day, Alfred," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5: 286–87.

became its editor, a position he was to hold until his death.¹⁷ Two years later, in 1846, Desmond Ryan (1816–1888) joined him as sub-editor and contributor.

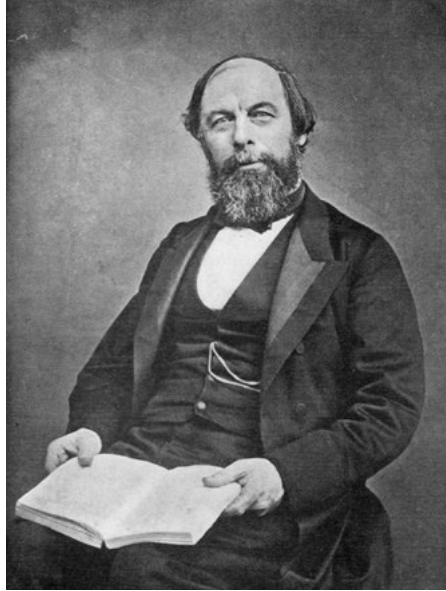


Fig. 1 James William Davison from a picture reproduced in Joseph Bennett, *Forty Years of Music, 1865–1905* (London: Methuen & Co., 1908).

If Henry Fothergill Chorley reigned supreme as the mouthpiece of *The Athenaeum*, Davison exerted full control over *The Musical World*. His personality was clearly characterised by a strong commitment to the cause of English national music and, even in his earlier career, “he formed one of that group of young men who, about 1835, cherished the idea of a modern native school, an idea for whose maintenance he diligently used his journalistic pen.”¹⁸ No less interested in presenting the works of the great modern masters to the general public, he had two maxims that epitomise his thoughts and beliefs: England is not an unmusical country; the people at large can be trusted to appreciate

¹⁷ *The Musical World*, October 24, 1844, p. 347.

¹⁸ Henry Davison, *Music during the Victorian Era. From Mendelssohn to Wagner: Being the Memoirs of J. W. Davison, Forty Years Music Critic of “The Times”* (London: Reeves, 1912), p. 1.

the best music.¹⁹ His knowledge of music was limited to the modern composers and his interest in the music of earlier ages did not go beyond such leading figures as Johann Sebastian Bach and Georg Friedrich Handel. His conservatism regarding artistic matters can be defined in terms of continuity and deference to the masters of past epochs.²⁰ Francis Burnand, *Punch* contributor for 45 years and its editor for 25, from 1880 until 1906, wrote of Davison that “where his personal likes and dislikes were not concerned, his criticisms were reliable; but where there was a bias, then to read between his lines was an absolute necessity in order to get at anything like the truth.”²¹ Joseph Bennett, music critic of *The Daily Telegraph* from 1870 and assistant editor of *The Musical World* after Desmond Ryan, entertained a close and long-lasting friendship with Davison. According to Bennett, Davison exerted a strong influence over many colleagues. Among them were Desmond Ryan, long-time critic of *The Standard* and assistant-editor of *The Musical World*; Howard Glover, critic of *The Morning Post* and a respectable composer himself; and Henry Sutherland Edwards, who followed Glover on *The Morning Post* and was a regular contributor to *The Pall Mall Gazette*.²² Bennett provides us with a detailed account of the peculiar way in which Davison loved to address different issues by assuming fictitious identities and appearing under different pseudonyms collectively called the Muttonians. They were “personal figments of Davison’s very quaint and curious intellect—puppets he used for the expression of ideas and sentiments, which through their very plastic individuality, he could represent in the most fantastic forms.”²³ The ruling Muttonian, a tall person with a sheep’s head and long tapering legs, was Mr Ap Mutton, who stood for Davison himself, but other names, such as Dishley Peters, were also chosen by the critic. Mr Ap Mutton was supported by a council of imaginary figures; behind them a real person was occasionally recognizable (Henry Sutherland Edwards was Shaver Silver, Joseph Bennett was Thaddeus Egg, and Flamborough Head was George Grove), while others were

19 *Ibid.*

20 Davison, *Music During the Victorian Era*, p. 70.

21 Francis C. Burnand, *Records and Reminiscences, Personal and General* (London: Methuen, 1904), 2: 277.

22 Joseph Bennett, *Forty Years of Music, 1865–1905* (London: Methuen & Co., 1908), pp. 17–22.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

completely imaginary (Dr Blidge, Dr Grief, Alderman Doublebody, etc.). These figures bear a strong resemblance to Robert Schumann's *Carnival*.



Fig. 2 Mr Ap Mutton, alias James William Davison. Davison loved to address different issues by assuming fictitious identities and appearing under different pseudonyms collectively called the Muttonians. The ruling Muttonian was Mr. Ap Mutton, a tall person with a sheep's head and long tapering legs. From a drawing by Charles Lyall published in Joseph Bennett, *Forty Years of Music, 1865–1905* (London: Methuen & Co., 1908).

Together with important articles and reviews of major musical productions, *The Musical World* included short notices as well as detailed correspondences from the provinces and abroad. The growing concert life in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds was described in reports from local correspondents; English translations of reviews and articles from the French and German press also made regular appearances, very often reflecting or even supporting the editor's personal inclinations and biases. Authors other than Davison who contributed to *The Musical World* are difficult to identify; since the journal supported the convention of anonymous criticism, most articles appeared unsigned while some bore a pseudonym. This position was overtly advocated in 1859, in contrast with the French system.

The writers of the London press are at present anonymous, and, according to existing regulations, it is not in their power to print their names if they would. Let us add that in no respectable journal is advantage taken

of the anonymous position. The general public is indeed unacquainted with the names of the persons who contribute so much towards its daily recreation; but all the classes that are immediately affected by criticism can, without the slightest difficulty, point to the critic. Nay the leading actors, musicians, painters—artists, in fact, of all descriptions—are personally acquainted with every writer in the respective departments of the press that concern their interests, and would speak openly if they considered themselves unfairly treated. Far from using the “anonymous” as a shield, the Critic of the press goes to work with the perfect conviction that he will be considered accountable for his opinions to any artist who feels himself unjustly assailed.²⁴

As controversial as this position may appear, *The Musical World* reflected the viewpoint of its chief editor, Davison, and never operated as the mouthpiece of any particular party; nor was it the advertising tool of any music publisher.²⁵ Its orientation was conservative, and its proselytism in favour of English national music stemmed from Davison’s personal beliefs; this characteristic resulted in a general hostility towards foreign musicians. Although in the late 1860s its preeminent position was to some extent eroded by *The Musical Times*, *The Musical World* remained a music journal of pivotal importance in Victorian London; it addressed a wide national and international readership that included practicing musicians, both amateurs and experienced professionals. Upon Davison’s retirement Joseph Bennett appears to have continued to supervise the journal until 1886, when Francis Hueffer took over. In 1888 the editorship passed into the hands of Edgar Frederick Jacques.

James William Davison also dominated the columns of *The Times*, which he joined in 1846. As the chief music critic of the most prominent and authoritative daily journal in the United Kingdom he exerted an influential role in the English press for over thirty years. However, while as co-proprietor and editor of *The Musical World* he was in a position to trumpet his opinions with no fear of direct consequences, in the capacity of music critic of *The Times* he was expected to express himself in more respectful terms. Because of his aggressive and often overtly biased attitude, he received complaints on more than one occasion during his career, even from the newspaper’s editor, John Thaddeus Delane,

24 *The Musical World*, July 9, 1859, pp. 441–42.

25 Richard Kitson, *The Musical World, 1866–1891*, 11 vols. Répertoire international de la presse musicale (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), I: xi.

to whom the journal owed its unprecedented prestige. Therefore, the quality of Davison's writings could be very diverse, mainly depending on the journal he was contributing to. While the reviews he published in *The Times* were usually clear and correct, his vocabulary classical with humorous expressions inserted occasionally here and there, his contributions to *The Musical World* were generally much wittier if not derisive or even blatantly offensive.

Later on in the sixties, while continuing to write for *The Times* and *The Musical World*, Davison started contributing to the *Saturday Review* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*.²⁶ His leading position granted him the opportunity to attend some of the most relevant musical events of the century, among them the Wagner festival in Bayreuth in 1876, which he recorded as "the triumph of the originator of an artistic cause he regarded as mortally hurtful to Art."²⁷

In 1878, upon Davison's retirement, Francis Hueffer was appointed chief music critic of *The Times*. This led to a major shift in the journal's editorial policy for, contrary to his predecessor, Hueffer was a strong supporter of Wagner's music and ideas.²⁸ After Hueffer, John Alexander Fuller Maitland assumed the position of chief music critic at *The Times* from 1889 until 1911. He was a strong advocate of English music and served the cause of the English Musical Renaissance not only as a critic but also as George Grove's successor on the *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and as a committed music historian.²⁹ *The Times* gave ample coverage to music and music events throughout the whole century, never missing a concert or an operatic performance. Its critics seemed to enjoy a certain degree of freedom, and the editor intervened only when the quality of the piece or the position of the critic failed to comply with the journal's editorial policy, as was the case with Davison.

The initial success of *The Musical World* was such that in 1844 its original owner Joseph Alfred Novello decided to get back to the journalistic business and acquire *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*. This journal, which had been founded two years before by Joseph Mainzer (1801–1851) in order to promote his teaching system,

26 Davison, *Music during the Victorian Era*, p. 275.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

28 Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, p. 21.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

was re-named *The Musical Times* and subsequently published as a monthly under the personal editorship of Novello.³⁰ Mary Cowden Clarke, Novello's sister, edited the journal from 1853 until 1856, granting ample space for the publication of continental musical treatises (Hector Berlioz, Adolf Bernhard Marx, François-Joseph Fétis and even Leopold Mozart). However, it was not until 1863 that *The Musical Times* achieved prominence, thanks to the work of Henry Charles Lunn. Under Lunn's editorship, which lasted until 1887, not only did the journal increase in size, but it also improved with regard to its "intellectual strength and breadth of interest."³¹ After 1870, opera performances received regular notice and particular attention was paid to Verdi's last works (*Requiem*, *Otello* and *Falstaff*). Among its contributors we find the name of Filippo Filippi; editor of the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* until 1862 and then critic of the Milan periodical *La Perseveranza* until his death, in 1884 he contributed articles and reviews from Milan.³² While staff members of the journal did not sign their articles, other external contributors did. Besides Filippo Filippi, the names of Joseph Bennett, George Alexander Macfarren and Edward Holmes are worth mentioning. In 1887 William Alexander Barrett (1834–1891), vocalist, organist, composer and music critic, succeeded Lunn as editor, a position that he kept until his death in 1891.

It has been already pointed out that the quality of the articles published in Victorian London varied. As we shall see, the issue was already raised in the 1890s, when some commentators drew attention to the pitfalls that seemed to be most common in the journalistic profession, all the more so when it came to reviewing a new opera. A certain wariness and a discomfiting tendency to be either too superficial or too technical were particularly noticeable. While to be too wary made it impossible for the reader to understand whether the critic liked the opera or not, to indulge in a detailed description of the plot seemed to defy proper

30 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

31 Edward Clinkscale, *The Musical Times, 1844–1900*. Répertoire international de la presse musicale (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. ix.

32 Leonardo Pinzauti and Julian Budden, "Filippi, Filippo." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed June 30, 2014, available at <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/09638>

criticism. Nor did musical parsing lead to a better understanding of the true merits of the composer.

Although it is not entirely true that English music critics were necessarily that cautious when called upon to express their opinion (witness Henry Fothergill Chorley from *The Athenaeum* and James William Davison from *The Times* and *The Musical World*), and even though generalisations are hazardous, it is possible to argue that, at least until the 1870s, Victorian music journalists tended to favour the old and cherish the classics at the expense of everything that sounded threateningly new. This conservative attitude prompted some of them to antagonise modern composers in a language that would be considered unacceptable today. In the 1850s scornful and offensive comments on Verdi, although sporadic, were not entirely absent; occasionally, the most disrespectful critics ended up trivialising the work and scoffing at the composer instead of expressing a genuine, although antagonistic, value judgment. In some cases, as the example of Davison suggests, this attitude was accompanied and reinforced by a strong nationalistic feeling; everything that sounded too new and progressive was understood as dangerous to the cause of English national music. Here and there a certain Philistinism can be also recognised; the idea advocated by Chorley that Art (with a capital A) should be true to herself, her purpose high, and her practice stainless was not devoid of consequences. The resulting hierarchy of the arts, while favouring Mendelssohn's symphonies and oratorios on the one side and Rossini's operas on the other, pushed the modern tendencies of operatic composition down to the lowest position on account of their being either too cumbersome or too trivial. Richard Wagner belonged to the first class, while Giuseppe Verdi was long considered a worthy representative of the second.

What did a music critic's job consist of? As far as opera is concerned, they were expected to review both the newly-composed works that such entrepreneurial managers as Lumley and Frederick Gye brought to London each year and those stock operas that had already entered the regular repertoire and could be mounted at very short notice any time during the season. This resulted in countless reviews appearing especially in daily and weekly newspapers. General magazines and

quarterly literary reviews published at a more leisurely pace and included lengthy music analyses and essays addressing larger issues such as compositional style, music aesthetics and even theatrical morality.

More often than not, the review of a newly-composed opera consisted of three main sections. The first introduced the opera to the public in general terms; it touched upon the circumstances leading to its composition, the manner in which it had been received on the continent and the extent to which it could be said to represent a progress in the composer's artistic development. The second section included the analysis of the libretto and the transformation its literary source had undergone in order to achieve the final result; the reviewer indulged in a narrative of the plot and detailed all its intrigues and machinations for the benefit of the uninformed reader. The third and often final section reviewed the quality of the performance and elaborated on the vocal and dramatic skills of the interpreters. Finding faults with a poor voice, an endless tremolo, a fragile intonation and an excessive gesticulation was not uncommon. On the other hand, expressions of enthusiasm and words of strong appreciation were not rare, and personalities like Jenny Lind or Marietta Piccolomini did not pass unnoticed. Their merits were generously scrutinised, and their weaknesses mercilessly pinpointed. In some case, the manner in which Verdi was said to abuse singers and harm their voices prompted expressions of sympathy and concern; then the soloist in question came to be portrayed as the unjustly wronged victim of a progressive composer of unequal competences. Or else, when in 1850s it was no longer possible to argue against Verdi's international prominence, the most reluctant among the critics insisted on crediting only the performers with the success of his works.

Finally, a verdict was pronounced on the true merits of the opera. The work was generally evaluated either with reference to those composers from the past who were said to have established the yet unsurpassed aesthetic canons of the musical art, or to the same composer's earlier achievements. While *Ernani* and *Nabucco* could not bear comparison with Rossini's masterpieces, *Don Carlos* and *Un ballo in maschera* were pronounced Verdi's worst operas when judged against *Ernani* and *Nabucco*. In the 1840s and 1850s Verdi seemed to represent the living evidence that Italian opera was constantly at its lowest ebb.

Once a new opera had successfully entered the regular repertoire the critic's task changed only slightly. It consisted of reminding the reader of the circumstances leading to its composition, drawing attention to the manner in which the London public had already bestowed strong signs of appreciation upon it (perhaps notwithstanding the critic's negative verdict), and reviewing its performance. If a stock opera was staged, the critic focused on the interpreters' merits and drew a comparison between them and those who had already distinguished themselves in the same role.

In fulfilling their task, Victorian critics could rely on and make reference to the verdict their colleagues on the continent had already pronounced; this was especially true when a new opera was put on stage. A case in point is offered by the repeatedly uttered complaints regarding guitar-like rhythmic figures in the orchestral accompaniment, the too numerous unison choruses and the prominence given to the brass instruments that qualify the general critical response to Verdi's operas in London in the late 1840s. These opinions seem to echo the denigrating criticisms uttered by François-Joseph Fétis in the columns of the *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* in the same years.³³ Explicit references to value judgments that had already appeared in the French and German press became more common during the second half of the century. Surprisingly, the same cannot be said about the Italian press. In fact, no explicit indication can be found in the columns of the periodicals taken into consideration that suggests whether the English critics took a real interest in the critical discussion going on among their Italian colleagues. Nonetheless, they seem to have been well informed about the manner in which Italian operatic conventions were evolving, and they were able to make use of the related musical jargon.

But what competences did these music critics possess? If William Ayrton in the monthly *Harmonicum* could assert in 1830 that "not one musical critic in five has the slightest knowledge of the elements or even the language of the art in which he sits on judgment,"³⁴ the same cannot be said about later generations of critics. Chorley and Davison were not

33 Katherin Ellis, *Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 197.

34 Theodore Fenner, *Opera in London, Views from the Press, 1785–1839* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 4.

the only critics possessed of strong credentials. The German-born Dr Francis Hueffer, from *The Times*, studied philology and music in London, Paris, Berlin and Leipzig, gaining his doctorate in Göttingen for a critical study of the troubadour Guillem de Cabestanh. John Alexander Fuller Maitland, also from *The Times*, entered Trinity College, Cambridge in 1875 and graduated in 1882. While Joseph Bennett was a professional organ player, other representatives of late Victorian music journalism such as Henry Sutherland Edwards (1828–1906) and Hermann Klein (1856–1934) gained prominence on account of their often fertile scholarly production, which included biographies of past composers and essays on opera and music history. Although Victorian music critics possessed competences of different kinds and levels, the amateurism that was said to qualify English music journalism of an earlier era is no longer to be found among the later generations, at least as far as the most prominent music journals are concerned.

Not surprisingly, the verdict of the specialist did not necessarily match the response of the general public. Music critics often took it upon themselves to highlight the difference between the abiding and the ephemeral in music matters; whether they were successful or not in fulfilling this task is another question. As was the case with *La traviata* in 1856, the strong objections raised against the immoral quality of the libretto and the triviality of the music could do nothing to dissuade the public from thronging the theatre night after night. The negative verdict of the knowledgeable critic could not affect the enthusiastic response of the unsophisticated.

Finally, an operatic performance in Victorian London was still a fashionable event. The composition of the Victorian public was heterogeneous, with representatives of the old aristocracy occupying their boxes side by side with the members of the new upper middle class. Queen Victoria herself was quite passionate about opera and even took singing lessons from Luigi Lablache; accompanied by Prince Albert, she was often reported to have attended one performance or another. The response of the audience was also habitually recorded in the periodicals; vivid descriptions of the enthusiasm of the public in asking for a certain aria to be encored, in calling for the singers to reappear before the curtain, in throwing bouquets and applauding warmly were common. Some reviewers called attention to the manner

in which the vast majority of the subscribers paid less attention to the music than to the interpreter. This was well described by the critic of *The Musical World* in 1845, who argued that “the singers, and not the composers, occupy their thoughts: they think not of what they hear, but of who they hear. An opera, to them, is a species of composition full of delightful solos for the principal vocalists, and the dreary filling up between these solos gives them ample time to look round the house and converse with their friends.”³⁵ While the vast majority of the public idolised the singer, only a select few paid attention to the composer and the score. Therefore, when a cherished star was announced a crowded audience could be easily predicted. The public flocked to the theatre and packed it to the ceiling night after night. Meanwhile, we do not find reviews reporting on singers being hissed or booed by the audience. Strong negative reactions were quite unusual, and it was enough for operagoers to desert the theatre in order to communicate their disapproval, dislike or simple lack of interest. Of course, the audience’s behaviour affected the theatre managers’ decisions and influenced the composition of the operatic programmes season after season. If a new opera was a failure, the theatre manager was ready to withdraw it after a night or two, and revive an old favourite. If it made a *furor* it was presented over and over again at the expense of the other titles initially announced in the prospectus. Opera in Victorian London was a business strongly dependant on the star system, and music critics could do little or nothing to guide the public response, influence the reception of a new opera or even determine its success.

35 *The Musical World*, April 3, 1845, p. 160; also cited in Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts, Opera and Elite Culture in London, 1780–1880* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007), p. 230.

