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Article

Half Life: The Decline of Sonata Form in the 19th Century Overture

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**Abstract:** Opera and oratorio overtures exist in an indeterminate state between purely symphonic and dramatic music. While they can be and often are extracted for symphonic programs, they are ultimately tied to the story to which they grant the audience a preview of the story and music yet to come. Those that are easily extracted are so independent due to their structure, one well known to the symphony: the sonata form. In studying overtures from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, one can trace a decline of the sonata form overture for one that is more subservient to the dramatic story soon to follow it. In this paper, three representatives of the early, mid and late period of the highlight this steady shift away from sonata form. Using Hepokoski and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata*, I will categorize these overtures into one of the five sonata types listed therein. The increasing number of deformations as one moves through the overtures chronologically will illustrate the deliberate decline of use of the sonata form for the overture in favor of a clearer reflection of the upcoming story.

**Keywords:** overture; opera; oratorio; Romantic Era; 19<sup>th</sup> century musicology; music theory

Overtures, first and foremost, are attached to their respective operas and oratorios. In other words, they are beholden to the story they represent. However, several overtures from the 18th and 19th centuries are regularly extracted to be performed by symphonies as part of a symphonic concert. Thus, they also inhabit a more abstract existence as symphonic works. Sonata form plays a great role in the structure of overture in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, during the Romantic Era, a significant rise of deformations of the form, led to pieces unrecognizable as symphonic works. Beginning with sonata-form as codified by musicologist A. B. Marx, deformations from that form will be pointed out in three distinct overtures of the 19th century, each representing the early, middle, and late periods of the era. Hepokoski and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata*, will be used to define sonata types, and to categorize overtures accordingly. It should be noted that Hepokoski and Darcy consider type three sonata form the "standard...textbook" sonata form<sup>1</sup>: the form, now taught to many students in early theory and history music courses.

Table 1. Ternary Sonata form including key descriptions for each section.

Sonata Sections	Exposition	Development	Recapitulation
Key	Begin in Tonic key, then transpose to the Dominant. This repeats.	Keys may vary, but this movement will typically end on the Dominant	The A section returns but remains in the Tonic key throughout.

In this paper I will explore the gradual abandonment of sonata form in favor of story-driven overture.

<sup>1</sup> James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy. *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. ) 344.

To understand the loss of sonata form in the 19th century overture, one must first examine what sonata form meant at that time, and how it was initially used. AB Marx first used the term in 1845 when he published the third volume of *Die Lehren von der musikalischen*<sup>2</sup>. During this time, works by Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven had long exhibited the features now codified in Marx's treatise. This publication detailed how a young composer looking where to begin could construct balanced phrases on a micro and macro level. The form is based on an idea Marx calls *satz* or sentence, a musical phrase beginning and ending on the tonic, in other words, an authentic cadence. As Scott Burnham succinctly puts it, the *satz* is "the fundamental musical structure...upon which all further formal structures are built"<sup>3</sup>. Marx slowly builds examples of well-constructed music, beginning with a melodic phrase to which he eventually adds harmonies. The form then, as it is understood to modern eyes and ears, is based largely on 18th century music, in particular the works of Beethoven, of which Marx was especially fond.

Marx's version of sonata form also includes distinct ideas about the keys, dependent partially on whether the tonic key is major or minor to begin with. Based on these opinions, Hepokoski and Darcy dig into the roles of the most important features of sonata form. The Primary Theme, for example, signals the beginning of the exposition and is meant to be followed by "contrasting material"<sup>4</sup>. Marx wrote extensively on the nature of these two contrasting themes in the same publication where he first discussed sonata form. According to Marx, a piece requires "a primary freshness and energy- consequently that which is the dominant- energetically, emphatically absolutely shaped...and feature. On the other hand, the second theme ...is determining the [idea] created afterward ... serving as contrast, dependent on and determined by the former"<sup>5</sup>. Marx goes on to postulate the primary theme is like a masculine protagonist while the passive, dependent theme is feminine. Naturally, these notions of gender roles reveal how dated the form is. However, it immediately conjures ideas of the contrast between the themes. Marx's idea captured the imagination of the musical world at the time, and the trend has persevered through to today's compositions and musical discussion. Because of contemporaneous composers' familiarity with Marx's work, it is not only permissible but advisable to keep in mind the masculine versus feminine qualities associated with a typical first and second theme.

One composer Marx knew personally was Felix Mendelssohn. Marx became friendly with the Mendelssohn family in 1829 and would later assist the young Felix in composing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and assisted him in putting on a revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*<sup>6</sup>. In 1836, Mendelssohn first performed his oratorio *Paulus*. Marx hoped that that Mendelssohn would perform his oratorio *Moses* which Mendelssohn refused, causing a rift between the former friends<sup>7</sup>. Despite the falling out, Mendelssohn the composer is obviously influenced by Marx the critic, if not Marx the composer. Though the overture to *Paulus* fits snugly into its category, it nonetheless plays with expectations in the form of tonal deformation.

The overture to *Paulus* opens in A major. In her book *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, Rita Steblin compiles the works of contemporaneous musicologists, some of the first in a field that was at the time, in its infancy.

<sup>2</sup> Sanna Pederson. "A. B. Marx, Berlin Concert Life, and German National Identity." *19th-Century Music* 18, no. 2 (1994): 87-107. doi:10.2307/746354. par 3.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Burnham "The Role of Sonata Form in A. B. Marx's Theory of Form". *Journal of Music Theory*, vol 33, No 2. Duke University Press (1989) 249.

<sup>4</sup> Hepokoski *Elements*, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Hepokoski *Masculine and Feminine* 1.

<sup>6</sup> Sanna Pederson. "Marx, (Friedrich Heinrich) Adolf Bernhard [Samuel Moses]". *Grove Music Online* par 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* par 3.

Of A major, Jean Rousseau called it a key of “devotional pieces or church songs”<sup>8</sup>. In 1777, Carl Junker called it “uplifting” and J. A. Schrader cited “Der Herr is groß” from Haydn’s *Creation* oratorio. In 1828, Franz Glöggel called the key “Satisfaction, trust in God...manly key for church music”<sup>9</sup> Ever looking back, Mendelssohn opens the piece using a chorale by Bach, *Wachet auf, ruf uns die stimme*<sup>10</sup>, or “wake up, the voice calls”. The chorale is a call to arms in a way, a joyful but commanding call for God’s people to awake at the Lord’s command. The chorale operates as an introduction to the exposition that begins on measure 15. This exposition is a variation of the previous chorale. However, the heightened harmonic complexity makes it more than the previous introduction. The exposition remains in the tonic key ending on a half cadence. Unlike the typical sonata form, this exposition does not repeat. However, this feature is less deformative when the sonata form in question is categorized as type two. This deformation is also mild, as the half cadence serves as a pivot point to modulate into the parallel minor key as well as the piece’s development. The key of A minor is attributed to sorrow as many minor keys are, but in 1713 Johann Mattheson wrote that it was “plaintive, honourable, and calm”<sup>11</sup>. The word plaintive was used to describe the key on at least two more occasions: William Stendhal Gardner in 1817, and J.A. Schrader in 1827 both published works in which they described A minor thus. Despite the Half cadence ending, the fermata over the last measure of the exposition and the striking difference in form, set this theme apart from the exposition. The development begins with a fugue. In measure 79, a sixteenth note theme begins in E minor, the previous key’s dominant. In measure 91, the chorale returns in a minor form while lower instruments continue to rumble in sixteenth notes. In measure 107, the piece modulates back into A minor. Mendelssohn clearly signals an impending return to the tonic key, and therefore, most likely the recapitulation. In measure 157, the recapitulation returns as does a clear chorale melody. However, it is this time accompanied by the sixteenth note passage in the strings. Simultaneously, the piece has returned fully to the tonic key of A major. The return of A major, and the clear return of the first theme in the form of the choral signals that this is the recapitulation, behaving as a recapitulation typically does. Mendelssohn includes a coda starting in measure 177, in which the tonic and dominant are reinforced, before a perfect authentic cadence brings the overture to a satisfying, true-to-form end.

<sup>8</sup> Rita Steblin *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002). 281.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 282-283.

<sup>10</sup> Mendelssohn, *Paulus 1*.

<sup>11</sup> Steblin 285.

**Table 2.** Chart outlining sections of Mendelssohn’s *Paulus* Overture, including language used by Marx.

Marx:	Primary Group	Secondary Group (Expo)	Development (Development)		
Measure	1-14	15-43 (rehearsal A)	44-78	79-90 (Rehearsal B)	91-106
Theme	Choral	Variation on Choral	Fugue	New Material transition?	New choral introduced
Key	A Major	(tonicizing F#?) A Major	a minor	e minor	e minor

	Retransition	Secondary Group (recap)	Closing Group	
Measure	107-156	157-176	177-199	200-207
Theme	Continuation of choral 2	New Material with Dev choral	Coda	Chorale returns for final cadence
Key	a minor	A Major	A major	A major

Mendelssohn’s overture serves the program to which it is attached without being dependent on it. The use of the Bach Chorale fits well into the narrative of the oratorio. After the people of God are called to wake up by the overture’s implied text, the first chorus is a declaration of love for God by those very people being called awake in the overture. In fact, even in the development, Mendelssohn is hardly adventurous. Other than the fugal material at the beginning of the development, the Bach chorale is omnipresent. The greatest deformations lie in the lack of repetition of the exposition, and the prominence of the development’s second theme during the recapitulation. This clever programmatic trend does not take away from the sense of structure in the piece. If anything, it adds to the sense of balance with which Marx himself was so concerned.

Carl Maria Von Weber was commissioned to write *Oberon* by Charles Kemble, manager of Covent Garden, in 1824. Two years later, Weber traveled to England for this opera, and the taxing journey eventually killed him in the June of that year<sup>12</sup> shortly before he was due to sail back home. However, before the premiere, a small number of people had access to the overture, including Felix Mendelssohn himself<sup>13</sup>.

The piece opens with a simple horn “do re mi” melody, followed by a dominant seventh phrase, and then the lone horn repeats. This horn represents the hunting horn of Oberon, the king of Faeries and titular character of the opera. In his book *The Language of Music*, musicologist Deryck Cooke compiles several examples of music that utilize certain melodic passages, and then draws programmatic conclusions accordingly. According to Cooke, the ascending 1-2-3 phrase implies the tonic triad, and represents “an outgoing,

<sup>12</sup> Clive Brown “Carl Maria Von Weber” *Grove Music Online*.  
<sup>13</sup> Larry R. Todd “Mendelssohn Essays”. (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group 2008) 15.

active, assertive, emotion of joy”<sup>14</sup>. Cooke’s various examples of this are largely from the 18th century. He cites various pieces from Mozart, and Handel, but also exhibits examples from Debussy, Stravinsky, and Vaughan Williams<sup>15</sup>, illustrating that the trend spans multiple decades, continuing even into the present. In addition, however, the orchestration must be considered as well as the melody. The French horn, particularly in Germany, is closely associated with hunting horns. John David Wilson discusses the horn’s role in German culture when he examines Beethoven’s use of E-flat major in his dissertation, *Of Hunting, Horns and Heroes*: Wilson associates the use of the modern French horn with the *parforcehorn* thought to be the authentic horn used in the German hunt from the Medieval age through the 18th century. As a luxury of the nobility, the hunt itself was associated with *Tugend*, a code of conduct meant for medieval knights, adopted by the emerging middle class in the 18th century<sup>16</sup>. The hunting horn became, therefore, a symbol of not just hunting, but the honor code associated with first the upper and later the bourgeois classes. This connects to the character of Oberon in several ways. Oberon’s horn sounds throughout the opera when he is soon to enter, or when his servant Puck first calls on the mortal Huon to rescue Reiza, his love. In addition, his status as the king of the faeries places him at the highest rung of society. This horn passage is meant to represent Oberon himself. Between the first two iterations of the horn call, a first inversion dominant seventh chord sounds, before the full orchestra holds a seventh chord based on the supertonic. The winds then trip through a playful chromatic passage of thirty-second notes, representing the playful faeries under Oberon’s rule. Shortly after a fanfare appears, played as expected in the brass. At measure 17, the first theme is played, though not entirely, and here lies the first potential deformation.

There is room for debate whether this piece is a type one or two sonata. A type one is also known as a sonata without a development. This is akin to Hepokoski’s description of Marx’s idea of sonata form. What makes this different from older forms however, is, as an overture, the piece is driven by the melodies more than the keys in which they are written.

It must be noted that while Hepokoski and Darcy claim that most overtures are type two, there are plenty of pieces to be called type one. The authors themselves cite “Mozart’s *Nozze di Figaro* and most Rossini overtures” as type one<sup>17</sup>. At first glance, it seems to be a type two, due to the lack of an extended development. The true mark of a type two is that the recapitulation reflects the exposition in key, as well as thematic form. In the case of *Oberon*, notes from the second, or feminine, theme do appear first in the piece. However, if this were to be called a foreshadowing of the theme, rather than a full use of said theme, then the first, allegro theme would come first as is expected. There is still a deformation to be found. Unlike most sonata form pieces, in which there are the masculine and feminine themes, with some new material seen in the development, there is a third theme, a waltz, in this overture. While a closing theme is common enough in a type three sonata, what is unusual is that after this waltz first appears in measure 82, the exposition continues to transition into another iteration of the feminine theme before the development begins in measure 118. It is the recapitulation that then determines the type.

As is expected, the entire recapitulation is in the tonic key. Just as in the exposition, there are hints of the feminine theme before the allegro returns in the tonic key. The recapitulation then behaves in the expected manner, staying in the tonic key through the end of the piece. A significant deformation occurs when the waltz theme returns. Typically, the recapitulation mirrors the exposition, and uses the themes there. However, if the piece

<sup>14</sup> Deryck Cooke. *The Language of Music*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) 115.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 116-117.

<sup>16</sup> John D Wilson “Of Hunting, Horns, and Heroes: A BRIEF HISTORY OF E-FLAT MAJOR BEFORE THE EROICA” *Journal of Musicological Research* 32 (2013) 168-169.

<sup>17</sup>Hepokoski *Elements* 344.



is categorized as a type one sonata, or a sonata without a development, the waltz would be a theme C, or closing material, and completely within the usual parameters of a type one sonata. In cementing the classification as type one, we can also infer that the material from measures 188 to 155, while they behave similarly to a development, are to be labeled as transitional material. This would make the extended amount of such material unusual.

Weber's phrases represent dramatic choices rather than choices made to suite sonata form. The horn opens the first act first scene with a minor descending 3-2-1, according to Cooke, a inward emotion of pain (horn is character himself). This horn call appears when Puck first influences the will of a mortal human<sup>18</sup>. The horn, therefore, is used as the character of Oberon, but also of his supernatural powers. The use of the waltz, a third theme that is alluded to in Act 1 when Reiza and Fatima, human women, rejoice at the idea of being rescued<sup>19</sup>. A series of seventh chords outlined in the strings allude to the waltz melody. In this way the theme reflects the human world. The allegro theme appears again at the end of act two, as the four human lovers all sing a quartet. There is another significant theme that appears only in the development, in d minor. D minor is referred to as a storm key. Beethoven's *Tempest Sonata* is just one particularly good example of D minor representing storms.<sup>20</sup> Musicologist J. A. Schrader called it "frightening and deeply moving" and while Ebhardt describes the key as evoking "gentle sorrow" he also claims it contains "wildness"<sup>21</sup>. This D minor theme appears in Act II, as Puck calls upon spirits of nature to cause a shipwreck<sup>22</sup>.

Though he works in the realm of sonata form, Weber's type one is a step further from the sonata form in the strictest sense. Within that form, Weber writes his overture to symbolize characters, and foreshadow upcoming events.

Years later in the century, and many miles from Weber in Germany, an up-and-coming Italian composer was commissioned to tackle a dense text: Shakespeare's Scottish play. In a letter to his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave for *Macbeth*, Verdi requested "If we can't make something great with it, let's try at least to make something out of the ordinary"<sup>23</sup>. The opera premiered on 14 March 1847<sup>24</sup> to great success. It was considered by his contemporaneous audiences and most critics to be "a leap away from the conventional demands of mid-nineteenth century Italian opera, towards dramatic truth"<sup>25</sup>. For this dramatic truth, Verdi breaks tradition entirely, and makes the overture less of an independent extract, and more dependent on the rest of the story. In *The New Grove Guide to Verdi and his Operas* Roger Parker explains that "the prelude is made up of themes from the opera. First, come a unison woodwind theme from the witches's scene [in Act I]. The second half is taken almost entirely from Lady Macbeth's Act four 'sleepwalking scene'"<sup>26</sup>. Verdi's *Macbeth* overture is entirely in f minor. The lack of modulation is in itself a significant deformation. According to Auhagen in his book, *Studien zur Tonartencharakteristik in theoretischen Schriften und Kompositionen vom späten 17. bis zum Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*

<sup>18</sup> Mendelssohn, Felix and August Horn, arranger. *Paulus*. (Leipzig: C F Peters, 1890). 23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Paul M. Ellison. *The Key to Beethoven: Connecting Tonality and Meaning in His Music*. (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2014). 363.

<sup>21</sup> Steblin 244.

<sup>22</sup> James Robinson Planché. "Oberon". *Opera Guide*. Impresario.ch, [http://www.impresario.ch/libretto/libweboboe\\_e.htm](http://www.impresario.ch/libretto/libweboboe_e.htm)

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Osborne "Verdi: a Life in the Theatre", (Alfred A. Knopf New York: 1987), 64.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 68.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 69.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Parker *The New Grove Guide to Verdi and his Operas* (Oxford Univ. Press: New York, 2007) 100.

Verdi used f minor to represent revenge<sup>27</sup>. Rita Steblin’s book shows that 18th and 19th century musicologists all conceded the key to represent the deepest despair<sup>28</sup>. The woodwinds alone carry the first theme, whose descending minor seventh sets a jarring tone that carries throughout the opera. The following frenetic galloping sequence appears immediately after the overture again, though slightly adjusted for the change in time signature. A fanfare introduces the brass section. Like Weber’s *Oberon*, the trumpet fanfare is a hint at the nobility to come in the form of thanes Macbeth and Banquo. However, this allusion to the tangible human world is overtaken by the high woodwinds arpeggiating a fully diminished a-chord, a sequence repeated at a new pitch set, which causes the high woodwinds to arpeggiate on a leading tone ninth chord. The first truly melodic moment appears in measure 17, a light and delicate descending sequence, the first glimpse of Lady Macbeth’s Act four aria. This could be argued as the primary theme, though if it is, the theme does not behave in the traditional sense. The primary theme is most often thought to be an allegro or other aggressive tempo, and typically, this first theme is returned to time and time again in different keys, and features either an authentic or half cadence. This passage, however, is interrupted after only two measures by a violent chromatic passage that will appear again. This first section of the act four aria does not appear again in the overture. However, a variation of the chromatic passage repeatedly appears. In measure 26, the melody that introduces the act four aria appears in full. The legato nature of this melody features qualities most often associated with Marx’s idea of the feminine theme. In fact, this aria features Lady Macbeth at her most traditionally feminine. Most of her arias prior to this moment are mandates to her husband to seize power, making the character a largely active and bloodthirsty leading lady. However, as she grapples with her guilt, a softer, more vulnerable side of the character is revealed, and with it, a more tender feminine theme is called for. In measure 34, chromaticism once again ensues. The call and response nature of the previous iteration returns, though the ascending portion is subdivided to heighten the drama of the passage. Once again, this passage leads into the return of the passive second theme. This second appearance of the theme implies a recapitulation, though this is a harder claim when the piece has never modulated from the tonic key of f minor. After this theme plays through once, a delicate coda is followed by a final f minor chord that begins piano but ends in a dramatic crescendo. If one wished to categorize this overture into one of the five sonata forms, type one is the closest. The easiest way to organize this would be to make the two themes from the act four aria the two themes. However, given the lack of cadence or reappearance in the measure 17 theme, this isn’t entirely accurate. The only truly played through theme is that which first appears in measure 26 and then again in measure 39. The deformations of only featuring one theme and remaining in the tonic goes beyond that of sonata form without a development. The overture represents the result of the trend of overture over the nineteenth century: dramatic story-driven choices supersede the need to compose in a particular structure. Verdi’s *Macbeth* begins with an overture in a new form.

**Table 3.** Organization of *Macbeth* overture. Highlighted portions feature music found in “Una Macchia”.

Measure	1/11	17	19	26	33	39	43
Key	F minor	chromaticism		chromaticism			
Notes	Intro/Fanfare	Act IV Foreshadowing	trans	Theme One	trans	Theme One	Closing Material

<sup>27</sup> Wolfgang Auhagen, *Studien zur Tonartencharakteristik in theoretischen Schriften und Kompositionen vom späten 17. bis zum Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1983.

<sup>28</sup> Steblin 263.

Even Verdi's dramatic departure from sonata form includes some features of the tradition. The two most traditional passages literally represent the female lead character. The more active of these two appears first in measure 17, The introductory material is also fairly commonplace, including the fanfare facilitate the introduction. Ultimately, the overture does represent a balance shown throughout the opera between the supernatural and real worlds that the opera simultaneously inhabits<sup>29</sup>. In fact, the overture appears to introduce a more consonant melody with a small section of the orchestra only to be interrupted by chromaticism and frantic sixteenth notes blasted by the full orchestra. In this way, Verdi's fractured structure is itself a dramatic choice, in which he alludes to the ultimate victory of the chaotic and supernatural over the more reflective themes representing the human world. Or in other words, fate, and impulse win out over introspection and prudence.

Scott Burnhum, in his article *The Role of Sonata Form in A.B. Marx's Theory of Form* cautions the reader that "Marx's model was not intended as a mold but rather as a dynamic pattern"<sup>30</sup>. Furthermore, Marx's use of 18th century music to highlight sonata form shows that Marx's notions of the form were a comment on his past more than his present. We can infer, therefore, that the form itself is more a suggestion than mandate. That being said, many overtures of the early nineteenth century, like Mendelssohn's *Paulus*, which, though featuring some small deformations, largely behaved as one would expect for a type two sonata, which was a fairly common structure for sonatas at the time. Weber's *Oberon* is somewhat harder to categorize, as his deformations are greater and therefore more noticeable. The root of these deformations seems to be in the dramatic choices of the work. A tableau of the coming opera is more important than creating a balanced symphonic work. However, even Weber's piece stands alone just fine as a concert work. Verdi's overture to *Macbeth*, however, stands apart. The deformations are rampant and frequent enough to push this piece out of the realm of sonata form and into something else entirely. To fully explore the topic, one would have to analyze many more pieces of the century from across all Western Art Music. For example, while Mendelssohn and Weber are clearly of the same school of composition, and all three composers in question studied many of the same composers of the previous century, "Italy may have never experienced a full-blown Romantic movement"<sup>31</sup> as did Germany and France. However, these three pieces, operating as representatives of their era, point to the gradual decline of sonata form in the overture during the nineteenth century.

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<sup>29</sup> Roger Parker. *The New Grove Guide to Verdi and his Operas*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 103.

<sup>30</sup> Scott Burnhum, 248.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Ann Smart, "Verdi, Italian Romanticism, and the Risorgimento" *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004 30.



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