

“Dramatic Vocalization” in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Rigoletto*

Philip D. Nauman
Boston University

Boston Area Graduate Student Symposium in Musicology
Tufts University

March 2004

The term “vocalise” has traditionally referred to the didactic *vocalise-étude*, ignoring entirely the equally important tradition of “dramatic vocalization.” During the nineteenth century, vocalization appeared in operatic music as a dramatic device, primarily used to highlight supernatural occurrences. In this paper I argue that “dramatic vocalization” should be considered as an entirely separate phenomenon. The expressive meaning of “dramatic vocalization” can be determined by considering a variety of factors: score directions, program notes, and programmatic titles; dramatic accompaniment; and contemporary commentary, whether composer memoirs or performance reviews.

Among the earliest examples of “dramatic vocalization” is the “Scena, Terzetto e Tempesta” from Act III of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (1851). In this scene Verdi used an offstage male chorus *a bocca chiusa* to depict not only the sound of the wind, but also to accompany the “storm” of emotions running through each of the characters involved in the drama. Although printed indications in the score consistently associate specific musical ideas with thunder and lightning, the function of the chorus remains something of a mystery. With each subsequent appearance however, its true, sinister meaning becomes more apparent through the surrounding dramatic accompaniment.