

Challenging Notions of *Tessitura*: Its Identification and Redefinition

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Prologue

In an attempt to decipher vocal differences between the mezzo and soprano voices, several years ago I casually chose from a library shelf an early Verdi opera. As I read through the opera, the close proximity of the two women's vocal lines surprised me. If I had been pressed to discuss the differences reflected by their melodies, where would I begin? Though this opera was the result of a novice at work, Verdi before *Nabucco*, I nonetheless began to think about the term *tessitura*. Does it, or how does it, differentiate or distinguish vocal types? More than key, more than harmonic analysis, more than words, could *tessitura* also establish characterization or point toward a more intimate relatedness of character that the foregoing could not? In *Aida*, would "vocal" Amneris differ from "plot" Amneris? (Abbate, 1991). In other words, what is the meaning of her sound, of her melody? To answer these questions, I began to construct vocal portraits of Amneris and Aida based upon their *tessitura*, a facile undertaking, or so I thought. After all, *tessitura* is not an unknown term. Instead, I found a morass of pitches, and, where I wanted to quantify my study, I was now faced with its qualification.¹

My objectives in this paper are several. The first addresses Verdi's understanding of the term *tessitura* as set out in the *Aida* letters and documents, collected and translated by the late Professor Hans Busch (1978). Though never defined, Verdi's use of the term is operational. My second objective is to compare notions of *tessitura*, summarized from English and Italian dictionaries, both music and general. Thirdly, I question these notions and demonstrate some of the problems in identifying the *tessitura/e*, using several vocal lines excerpted from the roles of these two young princesses.

My remarks can go no further, at least for the moment. I am preparing a second study which involves a statistical analysis of vocal lines selected from operas composed by Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi. My developing methodology should allow *tessitura* to be identified more easily within many nineteenth-century Italian opera scores. As scholars, we can then begin to conceptualize or reconsider how we think about, discuss, refer to, apply, and interpret *tessitura*. Lacking definitional specificity, the significance of the sound of the vocal line, when confined to or solely enframed by graphs of *tessitura*, would render my inquiry not nearly as productive, or render the conclusions of my research too technical if relegated solely to numerical expression. More than a report on pitch parameters, the leap in my second study adds a dramaturgical component to the *tessitura*. At this point, I can only suggest that *tessitura* sets up narratives not reflected by the libretto texts. From my previous work, it appears that it is the manner in which sounds unfold, or how the *tessitura* weaves in relation to the text which underlies it, which results in amplification of or changes in meaning previously not considered or overlooked.

My final objective in both studies addresses anyone who sings, regardless of style, manner, or skill. Once *tessitura* is identified, vocal health for all singers should benefit, i.e., a statistical census ought to be able to more precisely outline the vocal parameters of song, scene, act,

opera, cantata, oratorio, or mass. Consequently, if the vocal *tessitura* of a given role parallels or nearly parallels the singer's *tessitura*, the viability of taking on new roles may be less hazardous to the singer's vocal health. As well, an understanding of *tessitura* may provide the ability for singers or any students of singing to choose roles based upon research, rather than faithfully following authors whose methodologies are silent but whose recommendations are not. Roles once thought impossible to sing may actually be singable; likewise, the converse is also a possibility. It is expected that this research will assist in fostering more beautiful and dramatic song, thus extending careers and further delighting audiences.

Understanding *Tessitura* from Verdi's Letters

How would Verdi and those who participated in auditioning singers for the productions of the two *Aida* premieres (the first in Cairo, December 26, 1871, and the second in Milan, February 8, 1872) understand the term *tessitura*? Though it is rarely referred to in the Busch-*Aida* correspondence, there are several references, direct and indirect, concerning how it was used.

The composer wrote the following letter to his publisher, publisher-impresario, Giulio Ricordi, on May 25, 1871:

There is no way out; we must find a mezzo-soprano. If la Waldmann sings Eboli really well, she would be fine for Amneris, in both her character and *tessitura*, but unfortunately, one must never rely on what "they say." In any event, if you find no one better, sign la Waldmann, but without promising her the role of Amneris in case she flops in Milan. [Verdi's italics] (Busch, 1978, pp. 164-165)

To comprehend Ricordi's reply, it is necessary to consider another letter Verdi wrote several years later to Emilio Usiglio. From its tone, it is evident that Verdi was once again provoked by a request to rewrite an aria. In this instance, he voiced both his concerns and his ire regarding a change of *tessitura* for "Celeste Aida," the Act I, scene i Romanza written for the part of Radames. Nicolini, the singer for this particular *Aida* production, had previously asked Verdi to reduce the final two measures in B-flat to A. And Verdi's response?

I don't understand how the *tessitura* of that romanza can be high for him. If it were changed by half a tone, it would definitely be the *tessitura* of a baritone; and without the A any baritone could sing it. I perfectly understand that if the final two measures in B-flat were reduced to an A, the sound would become fuller, rounder, and more supple; but for the sake of one effective note, is it worth turning all the rest upside down? (Busch, 1978, p. 376)

Contrasted with Verdi's previous requests for a fuller sound, the requirement for this uniquely intimate moment is less, not more. His comments suggest how well he heard and understood the qualitative differences between these two voices, the original and the prospective, separated by a *tessitural* change of one semi-tone. As is so often the case with Verdi, he knew precisely what he wanted and, in this particular instance, he did not wish "to turn all the rest upside down" in order to achieve a "fuller, rounder, and more supple" sound.

Is it the *tessitura*, these spans of pitches which produce or enframe the sound he desired for the arias, duos, etc., or is it the sound he required for his characters which precipitate the *tessitura*? A perusal of his letters written to his librettist, Ghislanzoni, suggests both with each able to invoke the other. Verdi is always ready to suggest, even to dictate line and syllable count, or to explain or expand upon the scenario. Its attendant music may already have been penned or it is just measures away from its conception. In the Nicolini example, Verdi knew the sound and found the pitch area, the *tessitura*, that would provide it.

Summarizing these several letters, it appears that *tessitura* can function both objectively, i.e., the term itself, and subjectively as it applies to the singer. As a term, *tessitura* refers to a very definite choice of pitches, a *quid pro quo* of the composer or at least for Verdi. It also best reflects the sound he hears for a particular character at a specific moment in time. Consequently, a shift of one semi-tone qualitatively, if not affectively, changes that moment. On the other hand, the *tessitura* of the singer, yet to be engaged, must approximate the *tessitura* of the singer, the character in the opera. Should the *tessitura* extend to the outer edges of the register, the singer should have sufficient vocal resources to sing its pitches. Once the technical and interpretive demands of the *tessitura* have been met, the singer's character should be co-terminus with it.

A Probe of the Lexicons

Dictionaries, music and general, both in English and Italian, were searched for definitions of the term *tessitura*. From the earliest (Tinctoris, 1495) to one of the most recent (Simpson & Weiner, 1989), definitions were read, analyzed, compared, and reread. Often the rendering of one definition, even the lack of one, invited considerations of other terms and other meanings for words such as *ambitus*, *compass*, *register*, and *range*. In the approximately thirty English language music dictionaries I queried dating from 1889 to 1998, lacunae remain among the multifarious definitions of the term *tessitura*. For example, its root, "to weave" [from the Italian *tessere*],² is noted in eight of the Grove dictionaries of music but is absent from the remaining twenty or more lexicons. Instead, there are a few occasions in which "web" or "framework" are included, a significant difference, as these two entries are static concepts while the former denotes action or an unfolding. Furthermore, the authors of the entries from the earliest Grove editions never fully integrate the words "to weave" into the body of its texts:

Tessitura (Italian): literally texture, from *tessere*, to weave. A term, for which there is no direct equivalent in English, used by the Italians to indicate how the music of a piece "lies;"... that is to say, what is the prevailing or average position of its notes in relation to the compass of the voice or instrument for which it is written, whether high, low, or medium.

'Range' does not at all give the idea, as the range may be extended, and the general *tessitura* limited; while the range may be high and the *tessitura* low, or medium. In place of a corresponding word we say that a part 'lies high or low.'...³ [My division into paragraphs] (Grove, 1989)

In a subsequent search of Italian lexicons, Nicolo Tommaseo and Bernardo Bellini (1872), attribute the following definition to Rossini. Two of its three paragraphs are:

[Mus.] [Ross.] The range encompassed by the notes, more frequently of a melody. The higher notes or lower ones, that are used [touched] with minor frequency or occurrence, are not calculated in the *tessitura*. Thus, the notes themselves, which one can habitually use for weaving a melody suitable for a singer's voice, constitute what we call his *tessitura*.

In general, however, it is the centeredness of the *tessitura* that is used with major frequency, rather than the extremes. Even instruments have a *tessitura* convenient for them, which comprises the notes more habitually used by each of them.

Thus, weaving is constitutive to *tessitura* and remains one of my on-going concerns: How do the pitches forming the *tessitura* weave or unfold throughout the melody and how would this unfolding configure vocal portraits? The earlier Grove dictionaries of music assign to "the Italians how the music of a piece 'lies'," but this ascription remains elusive. It does not appear in the original of my translation or in any of the many Italian dictionaries, music or general, I queried. The purport of these two paragraphs attributed to Rossini may have influenced two of the earliest Grove editions and is either repeated in part or is reflected in its later volumes. The Grove also seems to be the mother of many inventions, as many publishers during the last century have followed its lead, such as the Harvard (1969, 1986), the Baker (1895), and the volume edited by Cornelius Reid (1983). *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (1992), as one might expect, is biased toward the singer, i.e., there is no reference to an instrumental *tessitura*. Given the late date of this definition (1992), it is the first occurrence of the notion of the 'fit of the role', those pitches written for the singer that the composer may have had in mind, which now must be matched to or fall within the actual singer's range. It is the grouping of notes, the part as a whole, which determines the *tessitura* rather than any individual notes.

Tessitura (It. 'Texture'): Term used in reference to the fit of the role in terms of the voice range of a singer who might be cast in the part. If a *tessitura* is said to be high, this may not mean that any individual note is particularly high but rather that the part as a whole tends to lie in the upper area of the voice. [my emphasis] (Sadie, 1992)

From my previous comments and summarizing other definitions from lexicons in English, I have concluded that *tessitura* is derived from its root, *tessere*, meaning "to weave." There is no direct English equivalent of the term which also means texture. As stated earlier (Grove, 1889, 1895), *tessitura* is "the prevailing or average position of its notes in relation to its compass" i.e., range, melodic span between its lowest and highest pitches, or the reverse. Range, however, is not coincident with *tessitura* and is quite different from it. In order to be "prevailing" or "average," the pitches of the *tessitura* must group within the whole of the work, whether high, middle, or low. Rather than consider a few isolated high or low pitches, *tessitura* is how the piece lies. For singers, it is their "natural" area in which to sing with the greatest comfort and ease. Other definitions include "where the voice is most exploited," "the main body of tones," "the part of the range most used," "the pitches habitually . . . used," and "most of the notes in a register."

Italian Dictionaries, Music and General

A summary of the definitions of *tessitura* excerpted from various Italian lexicons is also useful to this discussion. Some of these sources attribute the identification of vocal categories (soprano from mezzo, tenor from bass) to the placement of the *tessitura*. The term additionally distinguishes specific areas of the vocal range, as each vocal type can have a low, middle, and high *tessitura*. Moreover, the term can mean range, even a sphere of sound, and can encompass the entire extension of the voice. The statement, attributed to Rossini, that infrequent high or low notes are not calculated in the *tessitura*, has a double parallel in more recent volumes. The first, "a more favorable ambitus in which the voice can sing," is followed by "limited sonorities (from a higher sound to a lower one) within which a melody grows," i.e., pitches need be removed from the extremes of range. Part of this statement is also associated with "comfort and ease" (Reid, 1983), due to its "more favorable ambitus" and, of course, a singer is intended, "in which the voice can sing."

Significantly missing from the Italian lexicons is the word "weaving" [Rossini paraphrase]. In the Italian definitions, there is no sense of "the average position of its pitches" as cited in Grove (1889, 1895) earlier. Here, "the middle ambitus of a melodic line" is an average of sorts, i.e., between high and low pitches, whereby "more frequently the same melody is articulated." Not duplicated within any of the volumes I searched is the statement that *tessitura* was once "a vocal composition."

Definitions of *tessitura* should include its associations, such as "weaving" with "web" and "framing" with "framework," that is, the pitches of the *tessitura* can be enframed within a perfect fifth and so forth. Notions such as "to order, collect, contrive, compose, and devise" often operate tacitly, but pitches within a melody can form a *tessitura* (or *tessitura*) by incorporating any of these means. Because *tessitura* and *tessere* "proportion different parts of a discourse" (Baretti, 1798), their application to opera texts in general and to *tessitura* specifically are viable considerations. *Tessitura/e* can vary proportionately whatever the compass of the voice.

In Search of *Tessitura*

In my analysis of the vocal lines for *Aida* and *Amneris*, a few lingering questions confronted me: Which pitch or pitches form the *tessitura*? How many pitches do a *tessitura* make? Lacking a numerical answer, the question remains: For what duration does sound need to be enframed before it is a *tessitura*? Given the habitual and sometimes casual references to *tessitura* by singers, teachers of voice, and musicians generally, my initial expectations were that its pitches would be obvious. Rather than finding usual and customary instances of *tessitura*, I found, instead, specific and unique instances. For example, when the vocal line is similar to a scale-like passage, how does *tessitura* lie here? Are all the pitches included? Some of them? Even a single pitch? Example 1 illustrates a succession of pitches which more or less outline a scale.⁴ Can *tessitura* reside here?

Example 1. Act I, sc. i: Aida's Romanza. Her *tessitura* could be configured from $g^1 - g^2$.

Più mosso. ($\text{♩} = 100$)

pp

L'in - sa - na pa - ro - la o Nu - mi sper - de - tel al
Ye Gods watch - ing o'er me. Those words deem un - spo - ken! A

pp

se - no d'un pa - dre la fi - glia ren - de - to, strug - ge - -
fa - ther re - store me, His daugh - ter heart - broken, Oh scat - -

te, strug - ge - - to, strug - go - to le squa - dre del
ter, oh scat - - - ter, oh scat - ter their ar - mies, for

no - stri op - pres - sori Ah! sven - tu - ra - tal che
ev - er crush our foe! Ah! what will words do I

Do repeated sets of unison pitches qualify as *tessitura*? These pitches fix the predominant range of sound (Sadie, 1988), enabling the voice to lie, or better said by singers, “to sit,” one of their definitions of *tessitura*:

Example 2. Act I, sc. i: Aida responding to Amneris

Più mosso.

Ohimè! di guerra
A-las! the cry of

la - ori-me sve-lai se - gre - to, — sve - lai se - gre-to a me.
where-fore thou ev - er art mourning, where-fore thy tears now flow.

Più mosso. (♩=112.)

fre - mare l'a - tro - ce gri-di-jo sen - to. Fer l'in - fe - li - ce
war I hear, Vast hosts I see as - sem - ble. Therefore the coun - try's

pa - tri-a, per me, per voi pa-ven - to.
fate I fear, For me, for all I trem-ble.

rall

(Aida casts down her eyes and tries to hide her emotion.)

s'a - gi - ta più gra - ve cu - ra in te?
deep-or woe now bids thy tears to flow?

Similarly, Elsevier's definition offers one "predominant pitch," which resolves some situations, but not all. For him, *tessitura* "describes the lie of a composition, the predominant pitch, regardless of extremes" (1956). However, many vocal lines in *Aida* cannot be summarized in this manner:

Example 3. Act IV, sc. i(a): Amneris to Radames

Aida

Più mosso.

i - dai Nel di-spe-ra-tis - ne - li-ti del-
 liv - ing! When rout-ed fled the sav - age bands, To

Radames

Vi - - vel
 Liv - - ing!

Più mosso (d=120)

ppp

animando un poco

for - do fug-gi - ti - ve sol cad - de il
 fate war's chances giv - ing, per - ish'd her

animando un poco

pa - dre. Spar - ve - no
 fa - ther. Van - ish'd, nor

Radames.

Ed el - la?
 And she then?

During my analysis of the women's vocal lines, I noted several unusual or extraordinary features, such as Aida's high b^2 at the conclusion of the Act I trio. It occurred early in the opera and was a pitch held for an exceptional length of time. It gave me considerable pause, as there were no other notes similar to it in her music. Nothing in my definitional sources, of course, had included this unique circumstance. In fact, extreme high and low notes were to be excluded. Moreover, the b^2 was not a "predominant pitch," as the notes e^2-g^2 had formed the sonic area up to this point. Nor did it constitute "average," general," or "the main body," of tones. This passage seemed more significant because it closed the final measures of the terzet and was sung double forte. This B is just short of eighteen "beats" (three whole notes, tied to a double-dotted half note). Should this single pitch be considered a second primary *tessitura*, as it was a very limited and localized "range" of sound? Or, should it extend the e^2-g^2 configuration, realizing a *tessitura* of e^2-b^2 ?

Example 4. Act I, sc. i: Trio between Amneris, Aida, and Radames

di sven-tu - ra - - te s - mor, è pian-to di
to woe a hap - less maid, was dooming to

pian - to quel ros - sor, tre - ma schia - va,
blush, and blush be - trayed! Trem - ble, vas - sal,

no - i leg - ges - se in cor, oh guai a no-i oh
mar the plans I have laid, ah, woe if she should

sventu - ra - - - - (to a - mor!)
 woe a hap - - - - less maid!)

tre - ma, o schia - - va, ah! tre - - - ma.)
 trem - ble, vas - - sal, ah! trem - - - ble.)

guai, guai, - - - - se a noi leg - ges - - - se in cor!)
 mar, mar, - - - - should mar the plans - - - I've laid!)

Allegro
 Andante

This example demonstrates the difficulty in making decisions regarding the identification of *tessitura*, decisions which may result in judgment calls lacking complete objectivity. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the absence of criteria in these definitions might stem from situations as the one represented by this example. I believe, though, that the occurrence of a single pitched sound of some duration constitutes a unique instance of *tessitura*, one which cannot be ignored and will be further addressed in future research. This example also raises questions concerning the inclusion of two primary areas of sound within a *tessitura*, or, perhaps, a primary and a secondary area. One final consideration prompted by this example is that notions of *tessitura* need to be challenged, or reconsidered, and then redefined.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that problems exist not only in the definition of the term *tessitura* but in its description of pitches, i.e., their quantity and which pitches to include or exclude. In order to make the term more concrete, both in definition and in practice, a reasoned abstraction of pitches is required. To this end, attributions of *tessitura* which can add to its definition and/or description could be that:

- 1 *Tessitura* is an area of sound set off from any other.
- 2 It is a quality of sound.
- 3 *Tessitura* is a congregation of a pitch or pitches which enframe or outline a dominant range of sound, including secondary ones.
- 4 It is the place within a vocal line where most of the vocal activity takes place.
- 5 There may be more than one *tessitura* in any section or subsection of music.
- 6 It may be restricted to a single note, pitched high, middle, or low, but of some duration.
- 7 It may have many pitches within its borders.
- 8 It may be made up of a single, few, or many pitch classes.
- 9 *Tessitura* may include short or long spans of music.
- 10 Its pitches may range from high to low, in any ascending or descending order, or become a mix of the two.
- 11 It may be a collection of pitches, as they weave in and out of the melody, some-times necessitating gathering, especially between silences of music.
- 12 *Tessitura* may outline tonal triads, thereby creating blocks of sound.
- 13 It may occur in any style of vocal writing, lyrical, *parlato*, or recitative.
- 14 Within any given melody, *tessitura* may encompass the whole melodic phrase or be identified primarily by its middle pitches.
- 15 Indeed, *tessitura* may not have a center, if the pitches leave by leap to form another area of sound.
- 16 Moreover, *tessitura* may enframe repeating unison pitches or act as a bridge (*tessitura*), connecting the beginning musical phrase with its ending.
- 17 Within *tessitura*, there may be a further concentration of pitches, or there may be no concentration, with the *tessitura* spread through many pitch classes.
- 18 From time to time, singers may share the same *tessitura* space within the identical dramatic event. Finally, Much of the women's singing utilizes a *middle tessitura*, the

area of the voice where most of the tessitura congregate, relative to its category of voice. And lastly,

- 19 Much of the women's singing utilizes a *middle tessitura*, the area of the voice where most of the tessitura congregate, relative to its category of voice.

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Endnotes

¹ See my dissertation, *Amneris and Aida: Their vocal and rhetorical portraits configured by tessitura*, University of California, Los Angeles, 2000. This paper is a summary of some of the material in Chapter 3.

² Hereafter, a word or several words within quotation marks serve as key words, selections taken from the fifty-some definitions I queried. For full texts, please refer to Appendices B-H of my dissertation.

³ In this paper rather than citing page numbers wherein the term *tessitura* can be found, I use *sv*, "sub vero" [under the word] which instead directs the reader to the term.

⁴ The following figures, 1-4, are reproduced from the piano-vocal score of Verdi's *Aida*, published in 1880 Oliver Ditson & Co., a New York publishing house now defunct. Respective page numbers for these figures are: 51-52; 21; 250; and 27-28.
