

Verdi

Attila

Carlo Maria Giulini



mp LIVE

Giuseppe Verdi 1813–1901

Attila

Libretto by Temistocle Solera (with additional material by Francesco Maria Piave) after Zacharias Werner's play Attila, König der Hunnen

Attila

Odabella

Foresto

Ezio

Uldino

Leone (Pope Leo I)

Italo Tajo

Caterina Mancini

Gino Penno

Gian Giacomo Guelfi

Aldo Bertocci

Dario Caselli

Orchestra Sinfonica & Coro di Milano della RAI

Carlo Maria Giulini

Recorded: 12 September 1951, Teatro la Fenice, Venice

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	CD 1	52'43
1	Prelude	3'04
	Prologue	
2	Urli, rapine	1'40
3	Eroi, levatevi	2'17
4	Di vergini stranieri	4'54
5	Uldino, a me dinanzi	0'42
6	Attila! Oh, il nobil messo	1'12
7	Tardo per gli anni, e tremolo	3'15
8	Vanitosi!	1'12
9	Qual notte!	4'14
10	Quai voci!	2'10
11	Ella in poter del barbaro	4'17
	Act 1	
12	Liberamente or piangi	2'34
13	Oh! nel fuggente nuvolo	2'57
14	Qual suon di passi!	1'16
15	Sì, quell'io son	1'55
16	Va! Racconta al sacrilego	1'06
17	Oh, t'inebria nell'amplesso	1'59
18	Uldino! Uldin!	0'58
19	Mentre gonfiarsi l'anima	3'13
20	Oltre a quell limite t'attendo	0'33
21	Parla, imponi	7'01

CD 2**30'33****Act 2**

1	Tregua è cogl'Unni	1'53
2	Dagli immortali vertuci	2'40
3	Chi vien?	1'25
4	È gettata la mia sorte	1'33
5	Del ciel l'immensa volta	0'59
6	Ezio, ben vinei!	5'02
7	Si riaccendan le quercie	1'56
8	Oh, miei prido!	2'12

Act 3

9	Qui del convegno è il loco	3'48
10	Che più s'indulgia	2'25
11	Te sol, quest'anima	2'49
12	Non involarti, seguimi	3'42

From the Harewood Collection

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Synopsis

Alison Latham

Attila, the 'scourge of God', has invaded Italy and, on his way to besiege Rome, has destroyed the city of Aquileia.

PROLOGUE

Scene 1 – The city of Aquileia

Attila's victorious army is celebrating the destruction of Aquileia. Attila arrives. Against Attila's orders, Uldino has saved a group of partisan women who took part in the fighting. Odabella, their leader, so impresses Attila by her bravery and patriotism that he offers to grant her a favour; when she asks for a sword he gives her his own. Odabella is exultant: she vows to use it to avenge all she has lost.

The women leave and Attila sends for the envoy from Rome. It is Ezio, a Roman whom he has known in battle but whom he nevertheless respects. Ezio asks for a private audience. During a stirring duet Ezio reveals that he is alienated by the current decadence of the Roman Empire. The Emperor of the East, he says, is old and frail, and the ruler of the Western Empire is a mere boy. He proposes a bargain: 'You will have the whole world, leave Italy to me'. Attila contemptuously rejects this offer and accuses Ezio of treachery. Attila will march on Rome and destroy it.

Scene 2 – A mudflat on the Adriatic island of Rivus Altus

As calm returns after a night of raging storms, the hermits thank the Lord. They see a fleet of boats approaching across the lagoon, carrying refugees from Aquileia. The refugees are led by Foresto, who is mourning the loss of Odabella, his betrothed. He urges the people to establish an encampment where they have landed and to build a fine city which 'will rise like a phoenix from the lagoon'. (This city, of course, was later to be known as Venice.)

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ACT I

Scene 1

A wood near Attila's camp outside Rome

Odabella laments her father's death in the fighting at Aquileia. Foresto arrives. He had disguised himself as a Hun and, having secretly observed Odabella, believes her to be a collaborator. He accuses her of betraying him and her country by associating with her father's murderer. Odabella, in despair, reminds him of the biblical story of Judith, who saved Israel by decapitating Holofernes on their wedding night. Foresto is astonished at her savage scheme for revenge and forgives her.

Scene 2

Attila's tent

Attila is terrified by a nightmare in which a figure in white barred his entrance to Rome, saying 'To be the scourge of mankind is your only task; turn back! The road is closed. This city belongs to God'. Attila fights his superstitious fear of the dream by rallying his men to advance on Rome. Before the gates of the city a distant hymn is heard. Christian children and women are approaching, led by Leone, who utters the words Attila heard in his dream. Attila collapses in terror and prostrates himself before Leone.

ACT II

Outside the city of Rome

Ezio is reading a dispatch from the Emperor Valentinian: a truce has been declared with the Huns and Ezio is ordered to return to Rome. He reflects bitterly on Rome's decline from glory. A group of Attila's men arrive and invite Ezio and his captains to a banquet. One of them stays behind. It is Foresto, who tells Ezio to put his troops on the alert and to attack the Huns when he sees the signal of a flaming beacon. Ezio is ready to die for Rome.

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The Huns are feasting in honour of Attila and the truce when their Roman guests enter. Some of Attila's followers tell him to beware of the Romans. He ignores them, ordering priestesses to sing and dance. Suddenly, a fierce gust of wind blows out the torches. It is taken by the superstitious Huns as a doom-laden omen. In the confusion, Foresto reveals to Odabella that Attila's wine has been poisoned; and Ezio renews his offer of a pact with Attila.

The sky clears and festivities resume. As Attila proposes a toast, Odabella dashes the chalice from his lips and saves his life. Foresto admits it was he who poisoned the wine. Odabella asks Attila to spare Foresto in return for her having warned Attila of danger. He agrees and declares that the following day he will make Odabella his bride. In a multi-layered ensemble she urges Foresto to flee. He, on his part, swears vengeance for what he sees as her treachery. The Huns and Romans renew their hostility.

ACT III

Outside Attila's camp

Foresto, waiting to hear when Odabella's wedding will take place, contemplates her unbelievable behaviour. He is tormented at the thought that she should have betrayed him. Ezio impatiently demands the signal for the Roman army to attack the Huns.

Odabella rushes in, distraught, charging the imagined ghost of her father with Attila's sword. Seeing Foresto, she pleads for forgiveness: she has always loved him. Attila arrives to claim his bride. He accuses Odabella, Foresto and Ezio of treachery. The sound of the attacking army inspires Odabella to seize the opportunity to kill Attila.

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Woeful theatrics and bloodthirsty pounding: Attila revived

Stephen Jay-Taylor

If you've ever sat through *Andrea Chénier* and wondered who or what the 'Necker' was that the assembled, doomed aristos spend time anathematising in Act I, he was the Swiss-born finance minister of Louis XVI charged with the unenviable task of sorting out France's hopeless taxation system, the failure of which only precipitated the inevitable revolution. In the eternal manner of such taxmen since time immemorial, Jacques Necker was stinking rich. And he had a daughter; somewhat plain, somewhat portly, and only somewhat gifted – Anne-Louise-Germaine – whom he therefore swiftly married off to a minor Swedish aristocratic diplomat at Louis' court, who thereafter became the actual ambassador. As a wife with court connections, Mlle. Necker found first social, then literary, fame trading under her married name, Madame de Staël.

Vaguely liberal leanings and her diplomatic status meant she had an easy ride through most of the French revolution, though when the long claws of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* eventually began stretching even in her direction, she did what all fiercely patriotic French *belle-lettristes*, philosophers and politicians have always done in their country's darkest hours of desperate need: flee to England. Following Robespierre's razoring, she returned to her beloved Paris and set up the most glittering salon of the day. Alas, she soon developed a strong – and entirely mutual – antipathy for the runtish Corsican general steadily bulldozing his way through French politics, Napoléon Bonaparte, which, when he seized power, eventually led to her official exile and the burning of her books.

While thus confined abroad, she travelled extensively in the German countries, soaking up local culture, and spent two years writing what became her most famous non-fiction work, *De l'Allemagne*, which was finally published – as opposed

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to burned – in 1815, in England. The book is little more than a cultural diary – saw this, read that, went there, met him – fleshed out with lengthy, Mills and Boon-esque analyses of plays and novels, purporting in the process to distil the essence of the elusive German soul, dour and just a teensy-weensy bit bloodthirsty. But it was much admired in its day – as was she, not least by an importunate Byron – and still cast a long literary shadow many decades later.

One such admirer was Andrea Maffei, an Italian poet and translator of both Schiller and Shakespeare who, having married into the aristocracy via Countess Clara, lived the life of a literary gentleman in Milan from 1831 onwards. It was here that he came into contact with Giuseppe Verdi, 15 years his junior, and the young lion of Italian opera whose first four works – including, in 1842, the career-making third, *Nabucco* – had all had their premieres at the city's Teatro alla Scala, then as now the still-turning centre of Italian social life. Verdi became a regular guest at Countess Maffei's salons, and was soon sufficiently close to consider Andrea a literary mentor and even, subsequently, collaborator.

De l'Allemagne was a house-bible *chez* Maffei, and it is safe to assume that the not-overly educated composer from a modest provincial background would have had no prior exposure to the worlds of thought and feeling – however spurious – it opened up and to which the conscientious Maffeis therefore sought to introduce him. Not least of these was the chapter devoted to the plays of Zacharias Werner, which rather unfortunately for Mme de Stael's judgement in the eyes of posterity take up more space than her devotions to Schiller (though the latter's *Don Carlo*, *Kabale und Liebe* – which Verdi set as *Luisa Miller* – and *Die Räuber* – turned into *I Masnadieri* by Maffei – receive the treatment just a few pages on). One play which she analysed in detail was Werner's then-fresh-on-the-stage *Attila, König der Hunnen*, which had only been premiered in 1808 while she was in exile, and which Beethoven himself had reportedly toyed with the idea of setting.

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For reasons that no subsequent writer has ever managed to make either comprehensible or even half-way plausible, Verdi was seized with enthusiasm for the piece, and, his run of successes having come to a juddering halt with *Alzira* and also having fallen out with La Scala's impresario Merelli as well as his publisher Ricordi, he signed a contract with the rival house of Lucca – whose owner lay abed sleepless all night groaning for want of an opera by Verdi, according to his similarly deprived wife – which effectively relieved Verdi of all responsibilities related to business matters since it involved an outright sale. Lucca could do all the haggling with management over artists and fees, leaving Verdi, who was becoming increasingly prone to – surely psychosomatic – ailments of all kinds, to concentrate on the composing. As it happened, ever since the triumph of *Ernani* at the Teatro la Fenice in 1844 – with Victor Hugo's thud-and-blunder piece about hidalgo honour turned into a libretto by the house's resident dramatist, Francesco Maria Piave – Venice had been clamouring for a new work from Verdi, so *Attila* effectively killed two birds with one stone.

In a long letter dated 12 April 1845, the composer wrote to Piave setting out his stall on the subject – 'there are magnificent things in it... three stupendous characters' – and enclosing not only his own detailed account of the projected Prologue-and-three-acts layout, but also a synopsis of Werner's play almost certainly written by Maffei with at least one eye on *De l'Allemagne*. Verdi, with the know-all confidence of the recent convert, exhorts poor, hapless Piave to 'read Mme de Stael' three times in the one letter, rather suggesting that his approval of Werner's play – of which he ominously admitted not to liking the last act – may have had less to do with its intrinsic merits, such as they are, than Mme. de Stael's bizarre approval of them.

Leaving aside its woeful theatrics and lack of any plausibility, it might at least be remarked that Werner's play about a Germanic warlord is written entirely from the



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German viewpoint, depicting the Italians, whom Attila has been sent by Wodan to scourge thoroughly, as devious, unprincipled, degenerate and thoroughly deserving of such scourging. Attila, the barbarian Hun, is the only character in the play to behave consistently and honourably throughout. And the choruses, which Verdi thought ‘magnificent’ are not – except one – voiced by the put-upon Italians, but by the invaders, who become a preposterous gallimaufry of Huns, Ostrogoths, Heruls and Druids littering the stage in Temistocle Solera’s interventionist libretto (poor Piave having been given the heave-ho – temporarily until Act III, as it transpired – in favour of the far more flamboyant hack writer of *Nabucco*, *I Lombardi* and *Giovanna d’Arco*). Hardly the stuff of a rabble-rousing, tub-thumping flag-waver for Italian consumption, one might have thought. And yet...

The Venetian premiere, which was put back by two months to 17 March 1846 with Verdi apparently half-dead from various afflictions – an obituary actually appeared in Leipzig two days earlier – was critically considered as little more than a *succès d’estime*. The opera drew an ever-more subdued response once past the shameless piece of audience-sucking that Solera had pasted into the Prologue depicting the supposed founding of Venice – in 452 AD, please note, approximately 450 years too early – on the Adriatic mudflats by an oxymoronic “chorus of hermits”. And though Verdi’s pupil Muzio wrote enthusiastically to the folks back home of the opera’s fanatical reception, with torch-lit parades and laurel wreaths, not only did the work never reappear at La Fenice in Verdi’s lifetime, it was never heard locally again until 1951 when the concert performance on this download was given to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the composer’s death.

Attila’s failure to reappear in Venice for over a century may have had more to do with poor singing by the original cast – Sophie Loewe, the Odabella, a previous Abigaille and Verdi’s desired Lady Macbeth the following year, was in precipitate decline, aged just 34, and formally retired before ever getting round to

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sleepwalking, while the men were considered off-form – not to mention the smell from the supernaturally extinguished candles in Act II which apparently stank to high heaven. Elsewhere in Italy, however, it was a completely different proposition, and stories abound of audiences roused to frenzies of patriotic fervour, partly by the music but doubtlessly also by carefully placed lines, usually one per scene, mouthed by the Italian characters, such as Odabella's very first utterance in the Prologue when asked what motivates her unmaidenly bellicosity: '*Santo di patria indefinito amor !*'; or Ezio's proposed carve-up of world-wide interests in Act I: '*Avrai tu l'universo, resti l'Italia a me!*'; or Pope Leo I (restyled 'Leone, an ancient Roman', as demanded by censorship) barring Attila's entrance to Rome in Act II: '*T'arretra ! Or chiuso è il varco. Questo de' numi è il suol!*'.

Consequently, *Attila* had a thriving stage career in the immediate short-term in Italy and usually abroad, though it failed miserably in London in 1848, where it was greeted with 'an unwonted unanimity of sulkiness' (Chorley), rendering doubly ironic the fact that the autograph manuscript rests in the British Library (all Verdi's others are either in Milan or Paris). It may be the most inappropriate vehicle for Italian patriotism considered even momentarily as a serious drama, but *Attila* seems to have been the opera that, more than any other of Verdi's spirit-of-the-barricade pieces, captured the public's imagination in the run up to, and immediate aftermath of, the 1848 revolution. Just how limited this imagination probably was at the time is rather borne out by the music: raucously pounding, brassily noisy and brashly commonplace, scarcely drawing short-winded breath in its headlong dash for the dramatically incoherent final act (when Solera found out what ill-motivated and implausible nonsense had been written by Piave to Verdi's precise instructions during his prolonged absence in Spain, and to which he was now expected to put his name *ex post facto*, he promptly gave up writing libretti forever).

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This impression of relentlessness is made even more marked in such a heavily cut performance as the one under consideration here, which omits nearly half-an-hour of music by suppressing all second verses, one whole first verse, and the rather striking choral *ballabile* in Act 2 scene 2, rather as if Giulini believed that you can only listen to so many in-the-footlights, lunging cabalettas, in which this score absolutely abounds, and no more. On the other hand, he excels in drawing from his Milanese band – which he had only formed in 1950 – some softer playing to accompany the *al fresco* mood music and tone-painting that Verdi writes to set the scene for so many of the opera’s tableaux (of the work’s seven scenes in total, five are set outdoors, in woods, military encampments, ruins and mudflats, and there is a brief snatch of storm music, a much-admired-at-the-time sunrise, two nocturnal soundscapes and two pieces of spook music to accompany supernatural events, all of which would stand him in good stead when he came to write the far superior *Macbeth* in 1847).



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Giulini, born in Barletta in 1914, trained at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, studying viola and composition, and had never been much enamoured of opera, either as a child – surely uniquely among conductors, he was never taken to one when young – or as an adult, when his relations with it were prickly and fitful, albeit invariably distinguished. He had been appointed the music director of Italian Radio in 1946, and in the post-war years frequently exhumed long-forgotten works for re-examination, amongst them – as well as this *Attila* – Cavalli’s *Didone* and Haydn’s *Il mondo della luna*, which latter brought him to the attention of Arturo Toscanini and thence Victor de Sabata, leading to his engagement in 1952 at La Scala, where he became principal conductor the following year after de Sabata’s near-fatal heart-attack. Though his relations with first La Scala in the 1950s, and Covent Garden in the 1960s were extensive, he disliked the compromises collaborative work in an opera house entailed, and from 1968 onwards withdrew from live operatic conducting until his death in 2005 (with one exception: a wintry

Falstaff given in Los Angeles – his orchestral home base at the time – in 1981, and toured to Covent Garden and Florence thereafter). His fame probably now rests more with his all-embracing symphonic repertoire, most of it recorded in London, Chicago and Vienna.

Italo Tajo is one of those singers who never actually seems to have been young once, or be identified with anything other than comedic character roles. Yet heard here as Attila, he was clearly a capable, if slightly anonymous-sounding, bass, one who had made his debut in 1935, aged 20, singing Fafner in *Das Rheingold*. He worked at the pre-war Glyndebourne at Fritz Busch's invitation, but returned to Italy on the outbreak of hostilities, remaining based in both Milan and Rome singing a wide-based repertoire, including *Wozzeck*. In the post-war period, his international career took off, and he became a regular at the Met, singing all the major Italian comic roles there, and finally taking up US residency, lecturing on opera at the University of Cincinnati and founding an opera workshop there, one alumnus of which is James Levine. He carried on singing smaller, *comprimario* roles at the Met until 1991, and died in Cincinnati in 1993.

The Odabella, Caterina Mancini, is perhaps not so well remembered these days, rather squeezed out of consideration by the all-conquering twin luminaries of 1940s and 50s Italian soprano-dom, Callas and Tebaldi. But heard here, aged 27, she was probably in her fearless prime (and certainly very busy: for RAI's Verdi celebrations of 1951 she recorded five more of his operas, including *Nabucco*, *Aida* and *Ernani*, all of them made commercially available). Even so, this is not repertoire anyone can sing in their twenties without severely affecting their vocal health and longevity – as the original Odabella could attest, or Callas, or nearer our own time Elena Suliotis – and Mancini was soon in trouble, re-emerging none too successfully as a contralto in the early 1960s before withdrawing altogether.

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Giangiaco­mo Guelfi was born in 1924, just a few weeks after Mancini, and likewise in Rome. He studied with Titta Ruffo, no less, and had only made his stage debut in 1950, singing – of all things for a debutant – the title role in *Rigoletto*. He became a fixture on the Italian operatic scene, specialising in Verdian roles – Ezio here – with forays into verismo and pre-Romantic works such as *Guglielmo Tell* and *La vestale*, and pursued an international career into the 1970s.

Gino Penno, the Foresto, had a brilliant career in Italy in the 1950s, singing demanding repertoire such as Lohengrin and Siegfried, and partnering Maria Callas in *Medea*, *Norma*, *Macbeth* and *Il trovatore*. Alas, this, and extensive international exposure, led to early burn-out and enforced retirement, following which he took up law. He died in 1998, aged 77.

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The original sources are stored in the Borthwick Library at the University of York, where they are curated by Dr. Christopher Webb. Many of them are unique, irreplaceable and fragile: acetates in particular have an unpredictable shelf-life and require extremely careful handling. They are being remastered by Roger Beardsley, who has a worldwide reputation in the field, to the highest possible standard, with the emphasis kept on the feel of the live performance.

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Roger Beardsley

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