



## **Verdi and Milan**

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This talk is about Verdi and Milan, and is in three acts, with a brief prelude and even briefer postlude. You may like to know that, as with most of Verdi's operas, the last act is quite a bit shorter than the first two.

### **Prelude**

When the eighteen-year-old Verdi moved from provincial Busseto, a town near Parma, to Milan in June 1832, to complete his musical training privately after having been rejected from the Milan Conservatory, he must have felt keenly the change in cultural climate. From a small town in which his reputation had been as a promising church musician, and whose inhabitants he later reviled for their parochialism and petty jealousies, he transferred to one of Italy's major capital cities, an international operatic centre with a rich tradition of intellectual and cultural achievement. At the heart of this culture, and at the heart of the city, stood the Teatro alla Scala, one of the two or three major theatres in Italy.

Much later in life Verdi recalled his lessons in Milan as extremely formal and academic: in particular he recalled no reference to the music of the present. But his recollections were written in 1871, some forty years after the events described, and they tell us more about the then-aging Verdi's reactions to an Italy increasingly influenced by 'foreign' opera composers (in particular Meyerbeer and Wagner) than it does about the reality of his own student experiences. His teacher, Vincenzo Lavigna (an important presence at La Scala) in fact made him buy a subscription to La Scala, one that allowed him into the theatre every single night. Verdi was resident in Milan for about two and a half years in the early 1830s, and many events in the theatre must have left a lasting impression on the young man: not least Bellini's *Norma* and Rossini's *Otello*, both starring the diva of the day, Maria Malibran.

In the middle of 1835, Verdi returned to Busseto, and in March 1836 was appointed maestro di musica there. However, during his student years in Milan he had made contact with a man called Pietro Massini, the director of a Philharmonic Society whom he assisted in various amateur performances. Even in the isolation of Busseto, he managed to keep in contact by providing Massini and his Society with a Cantata in celebration of the birthday the Austrian Emperor Ferdinand I, a piece that one reviewer described as 'full of warm and respectful affection for the August Sovereign'. Such a piece must later have been embarrassing later: recall that the Austrians at that time controlled most of northern Italy, Milan included. But Verdi's contact with Society was professionally of enormous value. In a series of letters to Massini over the next few years, we learn that Verdi's return to Busseto fired his creative imagination and ambition sufficiently to produce an opera. In part through Massini's advocacy it was accepted at no less a place than La Scala for the Autumn season of 1839. In late 1838 Verdi resigned his post in Busseto and moved to Milan.

The reception of this first opera, called *Oberto* and premiered in November 1839, was reasonably positive, but the events of the next couple of years become very murky: probably the murkiest in Verdi's entire life. There was a further La Scala commission, for a comic opera called *Un giorno di regno*. In June 1840, with Verdi perhaps half-way through composing this work, his first wife Margherita Barezzi died; when the opera

was eventually staged, on 5 September 1840, the singers performed badly, the public was derisive, and *Un giorno di regno* was immediately removed from the roster.

## Act One: 1842-1848

The first stage of our 'drama', the creation of Verdi's third opera, *Nabucco*, and his first triumph at La Scala, is again reliant on the composer's recollections, an Autobiographical Sketch he allowed to be published some forty years after the event. After the disaster of *Un giorno di regno*, Verdi says that he vowed to renounce composition entirely. He was wooed back to composing only reluctantly and gradually. And so, far from being just 'the next opera', *Nabucco*, first performed in 1842, became in some sense 'the first opera': a work without significant antecedents. Such a strategy, whether intentionally or not, has encouraged us to enmesh the opera in political, religious and personal dramas.

As soon as we examine the phenomenon of *Nabucco* closely, we find one curious fact: that what I want to call the 'myth' surrounding the opera revolves largely around just one piece, the famous chorus of Hebrew slaves in Act III. The words of this chorus, '*Va pensiero sull'ali dorate*', are simple indeed:

'Go thoughts on golden wings, / go rest upon the slopes, the hills, / where, soft and mild, the breezes / of our homeland smell so sweet! / Greet the banks of the Jordan, / the ruined towers of Zion... / Oh, my homeland so beautiful and lost! / Oh remembrance so dear and fateful!'

These words are, on the surface, an invitation to sentimentality that Verdi takes up in full in his orchestral introduction, trilling flute and all; but when the vocal line begins, all that word-painting goes out of the window. The melody is simple, disarmingly so: a series of symmetrical melodic phrases, with no rhythmic or harmonic surprises, just a simple alternation of dotted rhythms and triplets over a rocking accompaniment. Most surprisingly, though, the chorus sing mostly in unison, as if they are one powerful, collective voice (Rossini had it just right when he called the piece 'not so much a chorus as an aria for sopranos, altos, tenors and basses'). When the massed voices break into harmony, they do so in nothing more elaborate with the parallel thirds so typical of Italian folk music.

This new, hyper-direct voice that Verdi had discovered took Italian opera by storm. Within a few years, *Nabucco* had been performed all over Italy and in many far-flung places around the globe. A few years after that, with several more, equally successful operas under his belt, Verdi had overtaken all his rivals and predecessors, becoming (and remaining to this day) Italy's most famous and most popular opera composer.

Let's return for a moment to the Autobiographical Sketch and see precisely what Verdi says about how *Nabucco* came into being. In the dark days after *Un giorno di regno* he has rejected all offers of librettos, but eventually one is forced on him by the impresario at La Scala, Bartolomeo Merelli. He trudges home with it:

'Along the way I felt a kind of vague uneasiness, a supreme sadness, an anguish that welled in the heart!... I went home and, with a violent gesture, threw the manuscript on the table and stood before it. As it fell, the sheaf of pages opened on its own; without knowing how, my eyes stared at the page that lay before me, and this line appeared to me: '*Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate*...'

'I glanced over the following lines and received a deep impression from them, especially since they were almost a paraphrase of the Bible, which I always found pleasure in reading. I read one passage, I read two: then, steadfast in my intention of not composing, I made an effort of will, forced myself to close the script, and went off to bed!... No good... *Nabucco* was trotting about in my head!... Sleep would not come: I got up and read the libretto, not once, but two, three times, so often that in the morning you could say that I knew

the entire libretto by heart.'

The rest, as they say, was history.

The most remarkable thing about this account was not that people believed it at the time (the Sketch was first published in 1879): back then, people, particularly Italian people, had reasons to do so. 'Va pensiero' was already becoming canonic, becoming the most famous piece in all Verdi and firmly entrenched in the national consciousness. What's more, the age was generally prone to 'anecdotal' biographies and autobiographies: flowery artistic justifications and confessions, as generous in narrative flair as they were miserly in documentary corroboration. No: what's astonishing is that scholars continued to repeat this account throughout the twentieth century, quoting it as if it were a reliable record of an historical event. They did this even though, elsewhere in the Sketch (and rather creepily), Verdi manipulated the death dates of his two young children, having them and his young wife expire within months of each other rather than years in order to intensify the pathetic reach of his story about the failure of *Un giorno di regno*. Such lapses seemed not to matter to scholars once 'Va pensiero' became Verdi's topic. The numinous moment, the miraculous appearance of the 'right' text, was too perfect: 'As it fell, the sheaf of pages opened on its own; without knowing how, my eyes stared at the page that lay before me'. What is going on when such accounts are accepted as fact?

The explanation is not hard to find. It lies in the fact that pieces such as 'Va pensiero' became, and to some degree have remained, entangled in an alluring tale about opera and politics, a neat tying-together of the two that we seem willing and eager to consume again and again. According to this story, 'Va pensiero' and certain other Verdi choruses of the early and mid 1840s became a rallying cry of the Italian 'Risorgimento': their new manner energized the Italian national consciousness, encouraged the masses to the barricades in the revolutions of 1848 and generally accompanied the formation of the nation state in 1859-60. There is, though, a small problem with this story: so far as the 1840s are concerned, there's hardly any historical evidence to support it. It's true that operatic performances in Italy were occasionally the site of public demonstrations during the immediate run up to the 1848 revolutions, just as they had been to the revolutions in 1830; but Verdi's music was not involved such demonstrations much more than other composers: indeed, several others, in particular gentle, lachrymose Bellini, were judged at the time far more incendiary. So why did the connection get made? After all, although it was inevitable that the opera house, as an important (sometimes virtually the only) meeting-place for the urban bourgeoisie, occasionally became caught up in the century's great bourgeois revolutions, it was far more often a place where the ruling classes could rely on stability and an opportunity to display power. What's more, as the century progressed and revolutionary movements embraced an ever-wider socio-economic spectrum, a large element of the revolutionary population was excluded from all but the humblest of operatic representations.

But Verdi's case was special: by the 1860s and 1870s, when Italy did achieve statehood and was looking anxiously around for national monuments to symbolise its new nation, his early music lay conveniently by, and (as we've seen, with not a little help from the great man himself) was found eminently fit for purpose. And so arose the myth of 'Va pensiero' and a few other Verdi choruses: a myth that has remained in stubborn currency ever since. The chorus has furnished a soundtrack for countless groups wishing to create a simple sense of 'Italianness': from the most benign to the trivial to the most destructive. Emphatically in the last of these categories, Mussolini's regime was, for example, a great propagator of the patriotic image of Verdi, and for obvious reasons. In 1941, and in spite of quite serious military distractions, the Duce ordered extensive celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of Verdi's death. But appropriations of 'Va pensiero' go both backwards and forwards from this grim moment: backwards to Verdi's attempts to boost its significance in his autobiographical tales; forwards to its appearance in TV advertisements, and even as the 'Padianian hymn' of the north Italian separatist group, the Lega Nord.

None of this is to deny that opera in the early nineteenth century was in many areas inescapably bound up with the idea of nation and national representation. Nor is it to deny that 'Va pensiero' is indeed an extraordinary piece of choral music: it would not have been elevated to its positions both present and past

without its potent mixture of melodic single-mindedness and blatantly popular appeal. But we need to bear in mind that political 'events' and operatic 'events' are very different, their relationship often complex and subterranean. In this case, Verdi's reputation as 'bard of the Italian Risorgimento' was real enough, but it was constructed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when a young, newly consolidated, fragile Italy urgently required cultural monuments in order to create a sense of national identity: a moment in which the gentle nostalgia of 'Va pensiero' became a potent recollection of simpler times.

Let me repeat: I don't want to exaggerate. There's no doubt that Nabucco in general was a watershed: additional evidence of the way it caught the Milanese imagination comes from Verdi's next opera. His *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, first performed at La Scala in February 1843, was from the start intended as nothing less than Nabucco 2. Another religious subject with lots of impressive choruses: what could go wrong? Popular rumour has it that, after Nabucco, Merelli (still impresario at La Scala) left to Verdi's discretion the fee for his new opera: further achievements on Nabucco's scale seem to have been well nigh beyond price, and the first night of *I Lombardi* was again a clamorous success. Verdi was firmly established as a 'Milanese' composer, with La Scala as his home.

After the triumphant reception of *I Lombardi*, though, everything seemed to go wrong between Verdi and his adopted city. There ensued a period of sharp decline in his relationship with La Scala, one he said was brought about by a decline in the artistic standards and financial stability of the theatre. This separation was, of course, only part of a more complex story. It was inevitable that, as Verdi's reputation grew, he would receive offers from other prestigious theatres around Italy, and thus no surprise that the premieres of his next operas went to La Fenice in Venice, to the Argentina in Rome and to the San Carlo in Naples. But there was a continuing undercurrent of mistrust and exasperation on the part of Verdi, a good deal of it aimed personally at the impresario of La Scala, Bartolomeo Merelli.

Matters came to a head in late 1846, with a proposal that the Milanese premiere of *Attila* should open the La Scala season. There seemed now to be a state of open war between composer and impresario, with both money and artistic standards at stake. But then, shortly afterwards, open war of quite another kind intervened; it's a good moment for our first act curtain.

## Act II: 1848-1868

One of the striking effects of reading through Verdi's correspondence from 1844 to 1848 is how, starting in late 1846, the theatrical news gradually becomes invaded by political news. And the nearer we get to the revolutions of 1848, the clearer it becomes that operatic performances (as I said, by no means just Verdi's) become a focal point of civil unrest. There's an incident in spring 1847 when a conductor is reprimanded by the Milanese police during performances of Nabucco, 'for having given Verdi's music too obviously revolutionary an expression, one hostile to the Imperial government'. By the beginning of 1848, any event seemed capable of generating a riot. At La Scala the Austrian ballerina Fanny Elssler, who had been greeted with enthusiasm in previous seasons, was whistled and booed at La Scala, fainted onstage and retired immediately to Vienna. As if to confirm the opera house as an increasingly 'dangerous' place, on 22 February the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Milano*, the only newspaper permitted to report political events, carried a notice from the Governor of Milan threatening harsh penalties for demonstrators and mentioning in particular 'wearing certain colours, or making them evident; wearing certain distinctive signs, singing or declaiming certain songs or poetry, applauding or booing certain passages in a drama'. All this was to no avail, and on 18 March 1848 the barricades went up and in five days of hard street fighting the Milanese drove the Austrians from their city, remaining in control until the middle of August.

During these perilous times, the theatres, not surprisingly, mostly closed their doors. When the Teatro Carcano tried to interest the public even in such a 'revolutionary' work as Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (which was supposed to have started a riot that secured Belgium as a nation state), it was largely ignored. As one critic put it 'the populace is now thinking of more serious things than music'. Although the new management

of newly-named 'Teatro Nazionale della Scala' announced imminent activity, Milan's first theatre did not in fact open for opera during the months of the uprising.

In the midst of this activity, Verdi was in Paris, writing operas. He did, though, make a brief journey to Milan, arriving on 5 April. The experience of seeing the city at its revolutionary work encouraged him finally to write an overtly 'patriotic' opera (it was performed the next year in Rome); but what musical activity did take place in Milan (there were various concerts in aid of the wounded, and other ceremonial events) did not include him or his music, an omission that alone might cause us to reconsider Verdi's reputation as a 'patriotic' composer during this period. After settling some business affairs, Verdi returned to Paris, and by the middle of August the military battles had been lost and thousands of Milanese (including most of Verdi's revolutionary friends) had fled the city.

La Scala re-opened on 26 December 1848, with Milan again under the control of the Austrians. In the midst of an extreme clamp down on any expression that could lead to further civil unrest, when censorship and police control was at its height, the two seasons that followed staged revivals of many of Verdi's most popular operas, Nabucco included. It seems inconceivable in the circumstances that any of these operas had been associated with the failed revolution.

It is understandable that Verdi did not return to Milan, or have any dealings with La Scala, over the next decade or so. The theatre continued to feature his operas at the centre of its repertory (as did all Italian theatres), but although Merelli ceased to be impresario in 1850, Verdi kept his antagonism to La Scala (and perhaps even to the city) alive through the entire decade of the 1850s. What may seem more surprising is that his antipathy continued after 1860s, when both Merelli had gone from La Scala, and the Austrians had permanently been ousted from the city. But in the 1860s, in the new nation state that was now Italy, other Verdian enemies were now making themselves felt in Milan. During these years, and alongside Verdi's newest works, the repertoire of La Scala began to include an increasing number of foreign operas, first and foremost those of Meyerbeer, but also Halèvy, Gounod and others. This vogue for an 'international' repertoire came with the enthusiastic support from a younger generation of Italian composers, men like the young firebrand Arrigo Boito, who in the early 1860s made a celebrated attack on Verdi for his reliance on formula rather than form.

Verdi's distrust of this new vogue edged him into a staunchly conservative stance, one that would last for the rest of his long life. When consulted about proper courses of study in the new, nationally controlled Italian conservatories, he recommended little else but strict counterpoint and Very Old Italian music. Students should submit to constant, daily doses of fugue, enlivened only by study of Palestrina and then Marcello. No MODERN MUSIC must be allowed! From such a position, the way to a rapprochement with newly cosmopolitan Milan and with a new, national, forward-looking La Scala was difficult and complex.

The fact that a rapprochement was forged in the late 1860s is due for the most part to the tact and generosity of Verdi's second wife Giuseppina Strepponi. In May 1867 she took it upon herself to visit Milan alone, and she called on Clara Maffei, one of Verdi's oldest friends in the city but someone he had not seen for more than twenty years. On her return to home she wrote to Maffei, telling her of the effect her visit had had on Verdi. The wheels were in motion: a year later, in June 1868, Verdi entered the city of his first triumphs, to meet the novelist Alessandro Manzoni and doubtless marvel at a changed urban landscape.

While Giuseppina Strepponi was working on the home front, Verdi's publisher Giulio Ricordi was trying a more professional route towards luring Verdi back to Milan and La Scala. Ricordi was based in Milan, and so it was inevitable that La Scala would be his natural focus of attention: small wonder, then, that he was forever anxious to reunite the theatre with the composer who was his most lucrative asset. Verdi finally agreed to supervise a revised version of *La forza del destino*, first heard in St Petersburg in 1862. In retrospect, it was a decision that would influence enormously the circumstances of the rest of his career.

The next La Scala project followed hard on the heels of *La forza*. Verdi had agreed to write *Aida* for the opening of the Cairo Opera House by the middle of 1870, but had no intention of travelling to Egypt for the premiere. Given the fortunate circumstances of the revised *Forzaprimerie*, La Scala was the obvious venue. *Aida* duly appeared in Cairo on 24 December 1871, but in many ways the 'true' premiere took place at La Scala, only a few weeks into 1872, and under the composer's supervision. He had returned home,

Verdi continued, though, to fear that standards at La Scala were likely to fall if he were not eternally vigilant; throughout the final twenty years of his long career, one senses often that that disastrous period in the mid-1840s was forever stamped on his mind in dealings with the theatre that, even though its personnel had now changed completely, La Scala would remain a place that could potentially damage his works. In a word, La Scala brought out a vein of insecurity that would be one of the least attractive sides of Verdi's personality in his later years. Notwithstanding the fact that the Milan premiere of *Aida* was a huge success, Verdi's later memories of the event were clouded by the few negative reactions that appeared among the storms of applause, in particular the fact that some critics had dared to suggest that he had been influenced by 'foreign' composers such as Gounod, Meyerbeer and - the new and most serious rival - Richard Wagner.

### Act III: 1887-1901

The pattern that formed with the Milanese premiere of *Aida* would hold for all subsequent Verdian premieres, all of which were at La Scala. First came two major revisions of past works, those to *Simon Boccanegra* in 1881 and *Don Carlo* in 1884; and then the two late Shakespearean masterpieces, *Otello* in 1887 and *Falstaff* in 1893. The hugely increased logistical complexities of modern opera were ever present in these events, as was Verdi's desire to control all aspects of the theatrical message. What also intensified was the disjunction between great public acclaim and a feeling on Verdi's part that he was an increasingly isolated figure, a single example against what he saw as the dangerous tide of cosmopolitanism now sweeping through Italian culture. In this sense, the reception of *Otello* and, in particular, *Falstaff* is highly significant. Critical plaudits came from every conceivable side, many of them openly celebrating Verdi's status as a kind of one-man festa nazionale; but critical understanding was rare, and it is clear that, behind the plaudits, both critics and public were perplexed by Verdi's last manner. Verdi's reaction to this disjunction was complex, but certain strands recur. One important ploy was to attempt to influence public opinion by taking an active part in the construction of his biographical myth, in particular of his position as a national figure, a man of the people whose simple melodies had inspired the masses. Another recurring theme was his continued criticism of the present state of music in Italy. In any public forum he became cautious. He could, for one thing, get farcically misquoted: his indignation can only be imagined at a much-circulated report of how he had announced that he could now die 'a happy man', having heard, of all operas, *Cavalleria rusticana* for the first time. Again and again, we encounter the difficulties the aging Verdi had in negotiating his position in the 'modern' world.

From a creative point of view, though, Verdi was aided by an enormously important new collaborator, his librettist for *Otello* and *Falstaff*, Arrigo Boito. After Boito's activities in the 'avant garde' of the 1860s, some of them (as you heard earlier) overtly critical of Verdi, the fact that the collaboration happened at all is due in large part to the patient maneuverings of Giulio Ricordi; but it also marks a change in the younger man: Boito had mellowed by the late 1870s and 1880s. But there was still a generational gap between him and Verdi, and it is hardly surprising that the early days of their work together are punctuated by some remarkably basic differences of opinion.

For example, in one of his first letters to Boito about the *Otello* project, commenting on Boito's draft libretto, Verdi ventured that the 'dramatic element' was missing from the end of Act III, after the great set piece in which all on stage react to *Otello's* striking of *Desdemona*. He suggested a radical departure from Shakespeare in which Turks, defeated in Act I, would suddenly make a comeback, and *Otello* would throw off his jealous rage and summon troops to meet the challenge. True to the theatrical conventions of his past, Verdi felt the need for some external dramatic event that would lead the musical action onwards. Boito, for whom *Otello* was above all a modern, psychological drama, was horrified. He countered with potent 'decadent' imagery, talking of an *Otello* 'who acts as if in a nightmare', and saying that the claustrophobic

atmosphere he had built so far would be fatally dispersed by the scene Verdi suggested.

Most Verdi commentators are absolute about the relative worth of these and many other contrasting views on the evolving shape of *Otello*: in this case, Boito 'was right' because he was 'truer' to Shakespeare (that shifting phantom of so many European cultures), and - more simply - because he eventually prevailed, because his vision became legitimised by the musical setting. It might be more interesting, though, to see the struggle as simply one of different fashions: both versions of Shakespeare, whether the composer's heroic-romantic melodrama or the librettist's proto-Ibsen, are after all very distant from our own. But what is ultimately most striking is that, on this and on many other occasions, Verdi - who had earlier been a veritable tyrant in his dealings with librettists - gave way to Boito, trusted the younger man's perception of modern drama. The more one ponders this, the more remarkable seem Verdi's powers of musical invention in these final operas: his trust in Boito obliged him to do nothing less than re-invent his operatic language, find a newly flexible, rapidly changing mode of musical expression.

It is probably significant that during the final two decades of Verdi's life, and in spite of the operatic triumphs he enjoyed there, Verdi rarely spent much time in Milan. Dividing his time mostly between Genoa and his farmlands near Busseto, he would appear only occasionally in Milan, settling in the Hotel Milan and going about his business: supervising rehearsals or performances at La Scala; meeting Boito and other friends; arranging for the construction of his home for retired musicians, the Casa di Riposo; consulting lawyers and, increasingly, doctors. Once his business was over, he would leave. In a sense Milan never claimed him back after those first successes of the early 1840s. Or only at the last. In mid-December 1900, a year in which La Scala had produced Wagner's *Lohengrin* and *Siegfried*, Verdi journeyed one final time to the Hotel Milan, ostensibly to visit his dentist. This time, he remained there until his death six weeks later.

According to the dictates of his will, the funeral was simple in the extreme (he asked for 'one priest, one candle, one cross'). But a month later, a solemn procession through Milan, accompanied by hundreds of thousands of mourners, assisted the transfer of his remains to their final resting place at the Casa di Riposo. The procession was sent on its way, famously, by an orchestral and choral rendition of 'Va pensiero', conducted by Toscanini and the La Scala orchestra. And so, in that sense at least, the story came full circle: Verdi's first success at La Scala, that *Nabucco* now nearly sixty years old, sounded forth in Milan's streets as a final farewell.

## Postlude

As you have seen, the story of Verdi and La Scala offers an uneven picture of the composer's development, mostly because it involves in detail only the extremes of his career. It is a story in which the entire corpus of middle period masterpieces, from *Rigoletto* to *Un ballo in maschera*, have gone entirely unmentioned. In one sense, though, the manner of Verdi's connection to Italy's greatest nineteenth-century theatre is indicative of a crucial larger aspect of his life. The fact that his first and last successes occurred at La Scala emphasises the continuity Verdi achieved in his career, the sense of remaining rooted in one ambience. But this perception is important only if we also understand the struggle entailed in maintaining such continuity. The fact that Verdi started and ended his career at La Scala is, in this sense, a symbol of the connections within his life's work; but, equally importantly, it encourages us to contemplate the rift that emerged between him and the theatre in his middle years. Such continuity as Verdi achieved was, in other words, anything but a sign of passivity on his part: it was struggled for and often struggled against. To return to La Scala after so many years meant to measure the immense distance he had travelled since leaving his operatic 'home'; it was a homecoming in which the buildings might be the same, but in which the landscape had utterly changed. It takes courage to leave; but it takes even more courage to return.