VERDI:
THE MUSIC OF THE ITALIAN RISORGIMENTO

"[I am but] a poor artist who has no other merit
than that of loving, and having always loved, his own country."

Giussepe Verdi, 1859

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The Risorgimento: A Historical Background

In 1796, the French battalions of Napoleon entered Italy and within a few short years had conquered the entire peninsula. The ten principal Italian states – four duchies (Tuscany, Parma, Moderna, Milan), three republics (Venice, Genoa, Lucca), two kingdoms (Naples-Sicily, Sardinia-Piedmont), and a theocracy (the Papal States) – were rearranged and reorganized under the new French administration. When the French armies crossed the Alps, they brought with them and sowed throughout the peninsula French Revolutionary ideas, such as liberty, equality, and fraternity. Many of these ideals would germinate in the subsequent generation of literature, poetry, theater, and opera, despite severe Austrian censorship after 1815. The French armies raised money by confiscating and selling Church land and property, creating a sharp and lasting division between clerics and anti-clerics, or those who supported the Pope's Temporal Power and those who did not. For the majority of Italians, the French invasion brought hardship and strife. In addition to heavy taxes, many peasants were forcibly conscripted and those who were not saw their crops confiscated or razed, by both the French and, later, the armies that had come to liberate Italy from Napoleon. For all Italians, it was a tumultuous time and they saw their country and lands raped year after year by foreign armies.

In 1815, the British, Russians, and Austrians defeated Napoleon's empire and, at the Congress of Vienna, gave the Italian peninsula to Austria to administrate. The Austrians reconstituted the Papal States under the administration of the Pope and the Kingdom of Two Sicilies under Bourbon rule. The Austrians also restored the independent Kingdom of Sardinia, mainly to serve as a buffer zone between French and

Austrian-held lands. The rest of Italy was divided into a kingdom (Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia) under the Austrian Emperor and four duchies ruled by relatives of the Austrian throne.



Italy in 1815

For roughly the next half century the Italian peninsula would be subject to foreign rule. Historically, the individual Italian cities and regions shared little in common with their neighbors, and each region even spoke an individual language. The Italians had not known any sense of national unity since the fall of the Roman Empire. The French largely eliminated the lingering remains of Italian feudalism, created and encouraged

trade, and created constituent assemblies between the Italian states. In the French, the Italians saw a sense of national unity and brotherhood based on the ideas of the Revolution. The Italians slowly began identifying with Italians beyond their own region that shared the same plight of foreign occupation. Under Austrian rule, the ideas of national unity, equality, and brotherhood conflicted greatly with the Austrian desire to impose an absolute monarchy and were suppressed relentlessly.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Italian nationalists and republicans incited numerous riots and demonstrations, all violently suppressed by the Austrian and Bourbon rulers. Many books and manifestos circulated underground during this period, such as the writings of Giuseppe Mazzini that called for national unity and implored the Italians to overthrow their oppressor. Several miniature revolutions, such as those of 1820 in Naples or 1831 in Modena, were inspired by these writings and organized by secret societies whose sole purpose was to overthrow the rule of foreign governments in Italy. But all of these revolutions failed, the most notable being the infamous "Le Cinque Giornate" Revolution in Milan in 1848 that resulted in the brief capture of the city from Austrian forces.

After the failed revolutions of 1848, many political exiles sought refuge in the only free Italian state, the Kingdom of Sardinia (also known as Piedmont). Here the ideas and hopes of Risorgimento were nurtured and grew. Eventually King Vittorio Emanuele of Sardinia and his prime minister Camillio Cavour successfully solicited help from France, and in exchange for the provinces of Savoy and Nice Napoleon III agreed to assist the Italians. In 1859, the joint Italian and French force captured Lombardy and the surrounding duchies, leaving only Venice and the Veneto in Austrian control.

In the summer of 1860, Piedmontese general Giuseppe Garibaldi invaded Sicily with only one thousand men. Within a month, he had captured Sicilian capital Palermo from approximately 24,000 Bourbon soldiers. Garibaldi's army, swelling continuously with volunteers, continued northwards and eventually conquered Naples in September. By winter of 1860, with the exception of the provinces of Rome and Venice, a united Italy had emerged. In 1866, the burgeoning nation acquired, with Prussian assistance, Venice, and in 1870, and only after Napoleon III removed his troops, the final province Rome was captured and added to the new Kingdom of Italy, stripping the Pope of his temporal power. After a half century of foreign occupation, failed revolutions, strife, and oppression, a unified nation of Italy finally emerged.

And into this world and these tumultuous times, Giuseppe Verdi was born and lived. He was born on October 9, 1813 in a tiny village in the region of Parma and, technically speaking, Verdi was born a Frenchman. His name on the birth registry with the local authorities reads Joseph-François-Fortunin Verdi. But Verdi was not a Frenchman, nor a Parmigiano, he was an Italian, even before such a term carried any true significance. Verdi and his music were influential in this birth of the Italian nation. Throughout his works, the values and issues of the Risorgimento recur constantly, and he expressed them with great skill and power. The political and nationalistic themes, such as the resentment of foreign oppression, national pride and patriotism, and republican ideals pervade his works, loosely masked in a veil of allegory and allusion. His name and music would become synonymous with the call for a unified Italian nation and the struggle for independence and freedom.

Verdi: Humble Origins of the Nation's Greatest Composer

Giuseppe Verdi was born of humble origins in the small farming village of Le Roncole, the first child of Carlo and Luiga Verdi. His parents were peasants and his father ran a small store that also served as a tavern and an inn. His path to music began when his father bought his eight year old son a small spinet. Despite the instrument's poor condition, this was certainly an extravagant gift for a peasant family. With the spinet and organ lessons from the village organist, Pietro Baistrocchi, Verdi began to study music. In a few short years Verdi quickly demonstrated a remarkable musical prowess and by the age of twelve was regularly substituting for Baistrocchi at the organ during church services. Verdi's father recognized the young boy's potential and sought to make arrangements for a better education for his son.

The man who supplied Carlo Verdi with food and wine for his store was Antonio Barezzi, who was also president of the local Philharmonic Society. Over the years he had developed a friendship with the elder Verdi and readily agreed to make arrangements for the lodging and schooling of the young Verdi. So in 1823, the young composer moved to Bussetto, at the time a town of about 2000 people and three miles from Le Roncole. The young Verdi began school and, in the evenings, music lessons with Ferdinando Provesi, the organist at the cathedral and music director of the Philharmonic Society. By this time Verdi was the official organist in Le Roncole and traveled home every Sunday and feast days for church services. Verdi lived and studied in Bussetto until he was nineteen years old when he moved to Milan to embark on the next phase of his education and his musical career.

Verdi's childhood has been well documented by biographers and historians and, because it is not the primary focus of this paper, will not be discussed in detail here, although it is necessary to note several important people and events that most assuredly influenced the young composer and helped form many of his personal and political convictions. Probably the most profound influence on Verdi's political ideology was his future father-in-law Antonio Barezzi. During the years of French occupation, Barezzi had profited from the sale of Church lands and properties. This aligned Barezzi with the republican, anti-clerical fraction of the town's populace. To Verdi, Barezzi was a second father, mentor, and friend, and living in the care of Barezzi the young impressionable Verdi learned from his father-in-law much of the political ideology to which he would staunchly adhere in his adulthood.

Another important and influential figure in Verdi's childhood was his first music teacher Ferdinando Provesi. Provesi was the music director of the Philharmonic Society, head of the music school, and organist at the local cathedral. Verdi would succeed him in all of those capacities some years later upon Provesi's death. Provesi was a dear friend of Barezzi and shared the same political ideology and, consequently, the same friends and enemies.

An important event occurred early in Verdi's schooling that deeply affected his political ideals. The parish priest, Seletti, Verdi's grammar school teacher, began to complain that the young Verdi was ignoring his studies and spending two much time on music. A conflict arose between Provesi and Seletti and, as was the trend in small town Italian life, quickly took on political undertones. Seletti, a priest and an advocate of the recent Austrian intervention to support the Pope's Temporal Power in Italy, greatly

disliked Provesi. Verdi, a pawn in this personal feud between the two men, worked rigorously to please both his teachers but quickly overextended himself in his attempts to balance his academic studies, his music studies, and his job as parish organist in Le Roncole, and eventually was threatened with expulsion from the grammar school. Allegedly the problem was resolved when upon hearing Verdi play the organ for a feast day mass in the Bussetto cathedral the priest conceded that Verdi's future was in music and urged the boy to put music first (Martin, Verdi 17-19). While Verdi remained friends with Seletti, the young boy learned that his path laid with music, with Provesi and Barezzi, and by extension, the political ideologies of the two men as well.

Another significant experience occurred on the death in 1833 of Verdi's music mentor, Ferdinando Provesi, which left open the combined position of director of the Philharmonic, head of the music school, and parish organist in Bussetto. The Philharmonic Society agreed to hold the position open for Verdi as he completed his final year of study in Milan with his teacher Lavigna. But the town's provost disliked Provesi and refused to appoint any pupil of Provesi to the post of parish choirmaster. Until a contest could be held and a choirmaster named, a provisional organist, Giovanni Ferrari, was appointed in the interim. And in Verdi's absence, Ferrari tried to strengthen his position and favor in Bussetto as the *de facto* organist and gained many supporters in the town.

Quite quickly the town divided over the two principal candidates for the joint-position. The dispute soon took on political undertones as republicans versus clerics, Verdians versus Ferrarians. The Philharmonic Society continued backing Verdi, while the cathedral and the music school backed Ferrari. The conflict deeply divided the small

community and each opposing party even adopted, or was assigned by the other, a symbol. The 'coccardini' ('white cockades') represented the republicans and the 'codini' ('pigtails') the clerics, both historically symbols of the French Revolution. Despite protests from the local churches and the town's Provost, the ducal Governor announced that there would be a formal competition for the disputed music post. Finally in 1836, a competition was held in Parma and Verdi was declared the clear winner. The supporters of Ferrari protested but could not dispute the government's decision. To the dismay of many in Bussetto, Verdi was named parish organist and musical director of the Philharmonic Society in April, 1836, almost three years after the post became vacant (Martin, Verdi 46-57). Although Verdi eventually triumphed there can be little doubt that the dramatic conflict seriously affected the young composer and his letters reflect the great stress and agitation of the ordeal. The event undoubtedly furthered the republican and anti-clerical sentiments Verdi fostered in his adulthood.

Throughout his life, Verdi resented the authoritarian nature of the Catholic Church. Although he believed strongly in Christian ethics, these were, inevitably, the same as Italian secular life. And while he lived by these ethics throughout his life in his principles and his actions, they seem not to have had any religious basis (Martin, Verdi 158-59). Verdi viewed the hierarchy of the Catholic Church as a political entity, and saw little difference between the hierarchy of the Austrian Empire and that of the Church. He was an independent thinker, familiar with a wide-range of literature. In addition to his education, indubitably many his of views had origins in his experiences in childhood and adolescence. Such experiences as the conflict between Seletti and Provesi, or the fierce

quarrel and division of the people of Bussetto on Verdi's application as the town music direction surely influenced the impressionable youth.

Another such anecdote, although exaggerated with time, occurred when Verdi was about seven years old and an acolyte at the church in Le Roncole. Apparently one day during Mass Verdi fell asleep, as one version goes, or was so deeply absorbed listening to the organ, as another states, that he missed the priest's whispering instructions. According to the story, the priest scolded the boy and shoved him down the altar stairs. Verdi then picked himself up, cursed the priest, and ran from the Church, allegedly never to return (Rosselli 17). There is probably some truth in the story, since Verdi recounted the episode many times and in many versions throughout his life. Some biographers have gone as far as to pinpoint the event to the birth of Verdi's anticlericalism. While such statement may be a little rash, the event would have undoubtedly affected Verdi's confidence in the Catholic Church.

Years later in his adulthood, despite his fame and growing fortune, Verdi never forgot his humble origins and childhood experiences in Le Roncole and Bussetto. Throughout his life he described himself as the "unrefined bear from Bussetto." Verdi is the epitome of the self-made man. He rose from peasant origins to become the greatest Italian composer of his time and one of the greatest opera composers in all of history. Verdi did not have the advantages of a formal Conservatory education, and struggled, by his own self-determination and the help of his father and father-in-law to learn the art of music. When the Milan Conservatory requested to name itself after Verdi, the composer,

never forgetting being denied admission in his youth, rejected the proposal stating “They wouldn’t have me young, now they can’t have me old!” (Martin, Verdi 41).

The Risorgimento Works

In nineteenth century Italy the opera house was the principal center of recreation and a focal point of every community. Patrons returned evening after evening, despite seeing the same work performed many times by the same cast. Audiences were well acquainted with the plots and regularly attended the opera house as both a musical and a social event. Before the advent of electricity, the candle-lit opera houses were not dimmed during the performances and audiences talked, moved about, and even conducted business during the performances. Because attending the opera was just as much a social activity as a musical one, music-lovers and the musically apathetic alike attended, and attended regularly.

The opera house was the quintessential place to discuss current events and political trends. Because of the large opera-going population, opera was an ideal medium to discuss social and political trends. But both the Austrian government and the Church severely censured all forms of artistic expression, and opera was no exception. The government clearly saw the potential danger in several thousand opera patrons invigorated by anti-Austrian political messages, and wished to prevent demonstrations at all costs. Thus political messages in opera were available solely through the medium of allusion. And so through the, often very loose, guise of allusion and allegory, composers could approach otherwise forbidden themes and messages.

Throughout his career, but most notably in his early and middle period works, Verdi sought, through the means of allegory, to fuse politically charged ideas to his art. As a republican and anti-cleric these political and subtle national themes greatly appealed

to the budding composer. But Verdi was both an artist and an Italian. And as an Italian, he knew that these loosely veiled calls for an independent Italian nation were an ideal means to appeal to his audience. Scenes in which the chorus waved the tri-colored Italian flag while singing "La Patria" ensured the success and popularity of an opera such as *La battaglia di Legnano,* regardless of the quality of the drama or music. But not all of his Risorgimento operas succeed solely because of nationalistic propaganda; many are successful in both the coherence of the drama and the high quality of the music. But regardless, these works appealed to the Italian people, called for a new, unified, independent Italy and the elimination of foreign occupation and oppression. In these works, Verdi became the musical voice of the Risorgimento and his name synonymous with the call for unity in the face of foreign oppression.

Nabucco

Verdi's third opera and the first true success was first performed to an eager audience at La Scala, Milan on March 9, 1842. The event was a true *furore* and the opera received instant popularity with the Milanese and, soon thereafter, throughout all of Italy. During its first and many subsequent performances, the famous chorus "Va, pensiero" was encored, sometimes repeatedly, despite strict police prohibition against encores. Because of its late spring season premiere, *Nabucco* was performed only eight times in its opening season. But because of its immense and instant popularity the opera returned in the fall for a record fifty-seven performances. In fact, during this season, more tickets were sold to *Nabucco* than the 150,000 inhabitants of Milan at the time by an estimated 20,000 tickets. Within a few years the work saw performances in every major Italian city as well as abroad.

Despite the opera's immense popularity in the years following its debut, *Nabucco* is not one of Verdi's most famous works and today reprises are infrequent, although occasionally occur. But to the fragmented and conquered Italian peoples of the 1840's, the opera, rich in political undertones and overt nationalistic themes, symbolized the prospect of national unity and independence. The work made Verdi an instant success and thrust him onto the national scene, even though no such nation yet existed.

The opera's setting is Jerusalem and Babylon in the year 532 BC. The plot focuses upon the fate that has befallen the Hebrews by the Babylonian conquest. As the opera begins, the Jerusalem populace awaits the inevitable arrival of the Babylonian army.

Upon capturing the daughter of the Babylonian King, the Hebrews believe they might be saved. But Fenera is released by her lover Ismaele, the nephew of the King of Jerusalem. The army arrives led by Nabucco's other daughter Abigaille, once scorned by Ismaele, and the Hebrews are captured and imprisoned.

The rest of the drama takes place in Babylon. Nabucco leaves Fenera to rule in his absence, but Abigaille, with the knowledge that she is really the daughter of a slave, schemes to usurp power from Fenera upon hearing rumors of Nabucco's death. Nabucco returns alive, but after declaring himself god, he is struck by lightning and incapacitated. Supported by the Priests of Baal, Abigaille takes the throne, imprisons Nabucco, and sentences all Hebrews to death including Fenera. As the Hebrews prepare for martyrdom, Nabucco regains his senses and arrives to rescue the slaves. Abigaille, realizing her power has vanished, commits suicide. Nabucco converts to the religion of Jehovah and releases all the prisoners.

While the official title of the opera is in fact *Nabucodonosor*, the opera is better known as *Nabucco*, the lyrical abbreviation of Nebucadnezzar, the King of Babylon. The origin of the drama is Biblical, although Verdi's version shares little accuracy with its Biblical counterpart. The characters Zaccaria, Fenera, and Abigaille are inventions and do not appear in the Biblical version, although Zaccaria might possibly symbolize Jeremiah, and Abigaille Jezebel. Fictitious versions and interpretation of Biblical stories were common in Italian opera, a notable example being Rossini's *Mosé*, which was still very popular in 1842. In fact, the fictional romantic subplot between Ismaele and Nabucco's daughter Fenera shares a number of similarities with the love of Moses'

daughter for the pharaoh's son from Rossini's opera. Also several times Verdi's librettist, Temistocle Solera, errs by referring to the Babylonians as Assyrians. But despite the biblical inaccuracies, the opera maintains throughout a wholly solemn and religious atmosphere, capturing the recurring Old Testament motif of Jewish suffering and steadfastness (Kimbell 20).

The first *Nabucco* was a play by the Florentine dramatist Giovanni Battista Niccolini from 1819; just four years after the Congress of Vienna ended the Napoleonic Wars and the French occupation of the Italian peninsula. In its published editions, Niccolini's play carried a complex key for understanding the political allusions in the work. Each ancient empire represents a modern European nation: Babylonia symbolized the French Empire; Phoenicia, England; and Egypt, Prussia. Also in Niccolini's work, each character represents a modern political figure. For example, King Nebuchadnezzar represents Napoleon and the high priest Mitrane is Pius VII, the Pope who crowned Napoleon Emperor only later to excommunicate him after the French conquered the Papal States (Kimbell 448). Niccolini was an ardent republican and lifelong opponent of the Church, and the themes of tyranny, oppression, and liberation are clearly represented in his work. The same themes and sentiments that would be taken and refashioned by Verdi and his librettist Solera some twenty years later.

But before Verdi wrote his opera, the story of *Nabucco* again appeared on the Italian stage, this time in the form of a five-act ballet written by Antonio Cortesi. The historical ballet was performed in 1838 in Milan and the same sets and costumes were used in Verdi's premiere four years later. The work was written and performed for the Coronation Season for La Scala commemorating the crowning of Austrian Emperor

Ferdinand as King of Lombardy and Venetia, an event that marked the high point of Austrian dominance in Italy. The ballet, *Nabucodonosor,* was based not on Niccolini's play, but on a French play by MM. Anicet Bourgeois and Cornu. The play had first been performed in Paris two years earlier and proved highly successful. But, unlike Niccolini and later Verdi, Coresti did not design his *Nabucco* as a political allegory. As a commission for the commemoration of the crowning of Emperor Ferdinand, Coresti could not have written an anti-Austrian allegory, and no historical evidence indicates that he wished to do so. Coresti did, however, refashion the plot to focus on the two invented daughters of Nabucco and their love for Ismaele, subsequently further distancing the plot from biblical accuracy. Four years later it is Coresti's version, largely unchanged, that Solera and Verdi fashioned for the Italian operatic stage.

Although Verdi and Solera molded their story line on Coresti's ballet, they strove to capture the themes and sentiments of Niccolini's work. Verdi included no key to understanding his political allegory, as Niccolini had done, nor is any explanation necessary to understand the strong prevailing political allusion. Verdi's *Nabucco* masks blatant patriotism with a loose veneer of a biblical metaphor. At the simplest level, the Babylonian conquest of the Hebrews symbolizes, rather explicitly, the Austrian domination of the Italian peoples. Although there is no indication that Verdi explicitly intended a deeper interpretation of his political allegory, it is worth examining the relationship between the characters of the opera and contemporary political nations and peoples.

Viewed on a more complex level, the symbolism of *Nabucco* offers an intricate relationship between the characters and modern political events. In this view, King Nabucodonosor might represent Napoleon, as in Niccolini's play, instead of solely Emperor Ferdinand. When Nabucco is incapacitated after being struck by lightning, indicating Napoleon's fall and exile, he leaves behind two daughters, one legitimate, symbolizing Italy, and another illegitimate, Austria. Fenena is Nabucco's true heir and in the work converts to the religion of the conquered Hebrews. But Judaism, in this interpretation, does not symbolize Catholicism, as both Italy and Austrian are both devout Catholic countries. Instead, the high priest of Baal and the Babylonian religion ironically represent the Pope and the Catholic Church. After Nabucco's fall, it is the high priest of Baal that declares Abigaille queen, much like Papacy's commendation of Austrian and Catholic rule in Italy. The daughter of a slave, Abigaille is the illegitimate daughter of Nabucco, and just as Abigaille's rule is unjust, so too is Austria's. Abigaille represents absolute power and tyranny. In Verdi's opera, the Hebrew people symbolize republican ideals and the Babylonians, imperialism. And along this view, it is only fitting that at the end of the opera Nabucco regains his sanity, frees the Hebrew people, and converts to Judaism, foreshadowing Italian dependence over next twenty years on France and the republic, and later empire, of Napoleon III for liberation from Austrian dominance.

But regardless of the specific associations Verdi intended, his patriotic message rings clearly throughout the opera. It is not merely Verdi's choice of subject matter that creates the strong Risorgimento undertones in the work. The 1838 ballet was based on the same Biblical story yet was not intended, nor interpreted, as a patriotic work. In

Verdi's *Nabucco*, the embedded nationalist sentiments are underscored, and rendered more powerful by the composer's vocal writing and musical style. Pulsating march tunes and expressive and melancholy choruses reinforce the deep allegorical messages that pervade the work. To contemporary audiences, *Nabucco* spoke of their plight, called for a united Italy, and an end to an era of foreign oppression.

Nabucco, and all of Verdi's Risorgimento operas, deal not solely with individuals, but with a conflict of opposing peoples on an international scale. The primary conflict in *Nabucco* is not just between Nabucco, Abigaille, and Fenera, but the fate of two diverse and opposing peoples. With a few omissions and augmentations, librettist Solera largely used the 1838 ballet version of the drama. But in his choice of words, Solera succeeds in coloring the dramatic situations with Risorgimento undertones and patriotic sentiments.

The libretto is full of nationalistic rhetoric, militaristic language, and religious fervor. In this way Solera and Verdi succeed not only in characterizing the two national groups in the work, but also in the direct extension of these sentiments to their allegorical counterparts. The patriotic undertones are present from the very beginning of the work, and in the very first scene of Act I the first reference to the invading Babylonian army the chorus sings 'Di barbare schiere l'atroce ululate / Nel santo delubro del Nume tuonó!' ('The savage howling of the barbarous troops / resounds in the holy shrine of God!'). While such violent language is expected in a description of an infidel army entering the Holy Shrine of Jerusalem, such rhetoric is abundant throughout the work in an increasing intensity and waning subtlety as the plot progresses. Verdi frequently refers to the Babylonians as *traditori* (traitors) and *stranieri* (foreigners) and Babylonia as the *perfida*

arena (pernicious land). In the first half of the ninteenth century throughout Northern Italy but especially in Milan, *straniero* was a standard derogatory term for an Austrian. Surely only Verdi's status at the time as a burgeoning, but relatively novice composer, allowed such rhetoric to pass the censure. A mistake that Austrian and clerical censorship would not repeat in reviewing subsequent Verdi operas.

In addition to the overt nationalistic cries, the libretto of *Nabucco* also masks much of its political messages under the veil of religious piety and fervor. For example, in Scene III of the first Act, Zaccaria prays that 'Porrá il cielo all'empio ardire: / Di Sion sulle rovine / Lo stranier non poserá' ('Perhaps at the last moment / Heaven will blast the impious enemy; / no invader shall be allowed to settle upon the ruins of Zion'). No member of the audience needed to be told that the 'impious enemy' was Austria and Holy Zion was Italy. By linking the political allusion to the divine future of Hebrews, Verdi strengthens his message both in its appeal to his Italian audience, but also in its linkage of the future of Italy to the will of God.

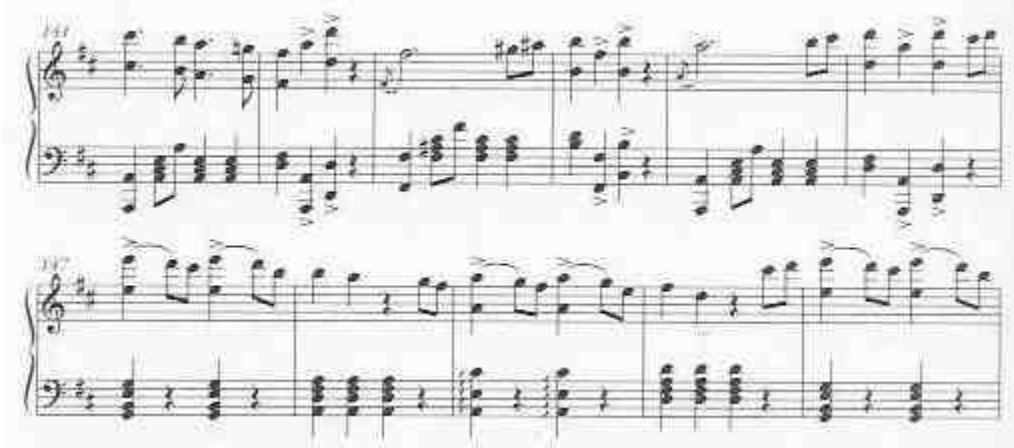
Despite the strength of libretto, *Nabucco* achieved its status as a Risorgimento opera largely because of the music, and the skill with which Verdi's music underscored the national themes and militaristic air of the work. In *Nabucco*, pious operatic choruses and vigorous march tunes are extremely prevalent. The opera is concerned more with communities than individuals, and this is aptly reflected in the music. Virtuoso singers dominate less, and the march and hymn occupy a central position. One of the primary musical features of the work is its use of identifying themes to represent groups of peoples such as the Babylonian army or the Hebrew priests (Martin, Aspects 157). With

these themes, Verdi succeeds in characterizing the Hebrews as suppliant, desperate, defiant, inflamed, and nostalgic, and eventually triumphant, and the Babylonians as solemn, ruthless, proud, and confident.

While not necessarily programmatic, the overture to *Nabucco* presents, in contrast, the various identifying themes of the opera. The *Sinfonia* begins with a soft low-brass chorale, demanding solemn attention while at the same time foreshadowing the brassy militaristic atmosphere of the work. The brief introduction is followed by a theme derived from the accompaniment of Zaccaria's first solo. The relentless and spirited theme of the Levites ensues next. After a brief interlude, the dreamy and nostalgic theme based on the 'Va, pensiero' melody of the captive Hebrews appears. This is followed in contrast by the arrogant bravado of the theme of the Babylonian army. The militaristic and spirited theme of the Levites return as the overture finishes with a brassy and stirring energy (Godefroy 22). The true force and power of Verdi's identifying themes comes, in part, from his foreshadowing of these themes in overture. These themes are motifs, motifs that not only become synonymous with the groups of people in the opera, but also powerful symbols of the political message inherent in the work.



Levites' Theme. Overture, mm. 24-28



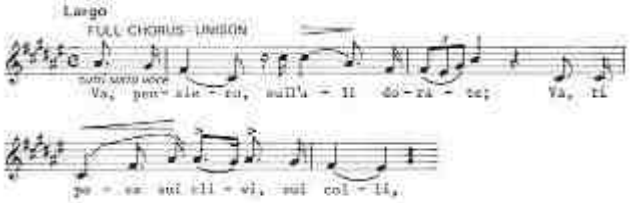
Babylonians' Theme. Overture, mm. 141-151

Nabucco is an opera of mass conflict. The conflict arises on a number of levels, from the themes of love, betrayal, and revenge of the individual characters to the struggle for the solidarity of one people despite captivity by another. The music of the opera aptly captures these struggles in the prevailing ethos derived from the orchestration and timbre. Both the choral and march idiom are used extensively throughout the opera, in both contrast and association. The timbre of a brass band pervades much of the music, both in the solemn choral pieces and in the vigorous march tunes. Much of the opera is orchestrated for the instruments of a brass or military band. Accompanying chords throughout are reinforced by horns, bassoons, and cimbasso and many of the melodies sound in the trumpets and trombones. Verdi also uses the trumpets and trombones as reinforcement even during many of the choral melodies. The effect of brassiness in the opera serves a number of functions. First and foremost, the brass timbre gives the work a militaristic air that matches the bellicose themes of the libretto. Secondly, the brass is used to emphasize the solemnity of the choruses, often invoking the mood of a funeral procession. And finally, the use of the brass band in both the militaristic march and pious

or nostalgic chorus pieces connect the two moods, irrevocably linking the desired freedom of the Hebrew people to a path of war. This is a relationship that resounded with the contemporary audiences and illustrated that the path for the freedom of the Italian people was inevitably linked to war with their oppressors.

In *Nabucco*, the idiom of the chorus represents the recurring motif of Jewish suffering and steadfastness. The unison chorus had been used before in Italian opera, but not quite to the extent it appears in *Nabucco.* In the opera, the unison chorus comes to represent national solidarity. In unison, the Levites curse their traitor, Ismaele – 'Il maledetto non ha fratelli'; in unison the Babylonians acclaim Abigaile queen – 'È l'Assiria una regina'; and most famously, the Hebrews dream nostalgically of their homeland – 'Va, pensiero sull'ali dorate' (Kimbell, 456).

'Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate' is the most famous chorus of the opera and one of the most memorable piece of all of Verdi's works. The chorus was sung by thousands at his funeral, catalogued as a patriotic work by Mussolini's fascist government, and used to celebrate the reopening of the rebuilt La Scala following World War II. Few other pieces in history have come to represent the collective will of an entire nation. But throughout his life, the 'Va, pensiero' chorus symbolized the Risorgimento and struggle of Italians to end foreign occupation and create an independent, unified Italy.



Chorus 'Va, pensiero'

Compared to the rest of the opera, the nationalistic tone in 'Va, pensiero' is subdued, reflective, and if anything, more effective. The chorus sings a stirring hymn calling for the end of oppression and servitude amidst a nostalgic reminiscence for their beauty of their homeland. To Italians in the mid-ninteenth century, the line 'O, mia patria si bella e perduta! / O, membrezza si cara e fatal!' ('Oh, dear native land that is lost to us! / What cherished, yet what bitter, memories!') has little to do with Judah and everything to do with conquered Italy. The true power of 'Va, pensiero' reigns in its universal appeal to all Italians. While the militaristic cry for the death of the enemy might not appeal to all Italians, the solemn and nostalgic reminiscence of their beautiful, but oppressed, homeland certainly did. It is obvious to see why the chorus began the unofficial anthem of the Risorgimento and why every Italian of the era knew the lyrics by heart.

Supposedly when Verdi first read the libretto of the *Nabucco*, he became so invigorated with the potential of the work that he could not sleep and stayed up until he had memorized the entire drama. With *Nabucco*, Verdi succeeded in creating not only his first successful opera, and the beginning of his rise to fame that ensued, but also a symbol of potential national unity. In the implicit political undertones in the work Verdi found a way to appeal to his audiences. In the years to follow, Verdi would write several other Risorgimento tinted operas. But none captured universal appeal and the collective spirit of the Italian people in the ways in which *Nabucco* had succeeded.

I LOMBARDI ALLA PRIMA CROCIATA

I Lombardi alla prima crociata (*The Lombards on the First Crusade*) is based on Tomasso Grossi's 1826 poem of the same name. The opera tells of the Lombards going to free Jerusalem from the Saracens, falling out among themselves, and finally overcoming the enemy in victory. *I Lombardi*, Verdi's fourth opera that premiered at La Scala, Milan in 1843, closely followed on the heels of the immense success of *Nabucco*. If in *Nabucco* Verdi masked his patriotic message by a distant biblical allusion, then in *I Lombardi* he abandoned the physical distance and much of the allegorical subtlety. The initial Milanese audience was both surprised and amazed to see the opening curtain rise to reveal a façade of the nearby Chiesa di Sant'Ambrogio.

I Lombardi, like its predecessor, was an immense success at its premiere and, soon thereafter, throughout all of Italy. Performances of this opera were held in cities as distant as St. Petersburg and New York. In 1847 Verdi refashioned the work to create *Jérusalem* for a debut at the Paris Opéra. At the premiere, the Milanese audience quickly identified with Verdi's Lombards while casting the Austrians in the role of the Saracens defiling the Holy Land. As in *Nabucco*, the Holy Land once again symbolizes sacred Italy and the audience understood the Crusade a foretold their political future. At the first performance when the tenor cries 'La Santa Terra oggi nostra sará!' ('Today the Sacred Land will be ours!') the audience duly echoed the chorus 'Si! … Guerra! Guerra!' ('Yes! … War! War!') (Martin, Aspects 11).

Despite the overt patriotic message of the work, it was not the political material that troubled the Austrian censors but the religious content. The Cardinal of Milan, an Austrian, objected to a paraphrase of the Ave Maria in Act I and the portrayal of the

sacrament of baptism on stage. Consequentially, librettist Solera and Verdi were summoned by the Cardinal, the later of whom failed to appear, to explain the sacrilege. After some negotiating, the baptism scene was allowed to stand but the words, "Ave Maria," were changed to "Salve Maria." The chief of police, Baron Torresani, is still remembered today for his comment in defense of Verdi: "I will not be the man to clip the wings of so promising a genius" (Kimbell 110-11). But although Verdi's first encounter with censorship was mild and worked out in his favor, after the *furore* of the premiere of the opera, he would encounter problems with the censor in almost every opera he would write.

Musically, the opera shares a kinship with *Nabucco* in its use of identifying themes for the opposing factions, the prominence of the march and the hymn, and the brassy militaristic orchestration. Although musically less appealing than its counterparts in *Nabucco*, the hymn comes into a new prominence in *I Lomardi* with the claustral chorus of Act I and the pilgrims' choruses of Act IV. And as in its predecessor, an air of hymnody pervades the solo and ensemble music as well. And for a brief period, the Act IV chorus, 'O Signore, dal tetto nation' ('Oh God of our Homeland') shared the same popularity of 'Va, pensiero.'

To characterize each of his opposing groups, Verdi gives an identifying march to both the crusaders and the Saracens. The crusaders' theme is first heard in the Hermit's *gran scena* in Act II, and the Saracen's in the chorus, 'É dunque vero,' also from the second act. Most interesting is Verdi's treatment of these two themes in the decisive battle for Jerusalem in Act IV. In the *battaglia*, the crusaders' theme is broken down into several constituent phrases always played by the orchestra. Similarly the Saracen tune is

deconstructed but played by the *banda*, the brassy and percussive military band instruments of the accompanying orchestra. "The battle is thus represented by the fragmented and overlapping march themes, tossed about from orchestra to *banda*" (Kimbell 328). Eventually after an *a tutti* climax, the crusader theme emerges victorious, and the Saracen theme fades in defeat.

Despite all the overt nationalistic elements of *I Lombardi*, Verdi ambitiously dedicated the work to Duchess Maria Luigia of Parma, the daughter of the Austrian emperor and the former wife of Napoleon Bonaparte, who duly responded in turn with an admirable gift to her most famous citizen. While contemporary critics found the opera musically weak and the drama ludicrously extravagant, the opera was nevertheless an immense success with her audiences, especially the Milanese. With *I Lombardi,* Verdi begins to abandon the veil of allegory and moves towards a culmination of his Risorgimento ambitions in the blatant national propaganda of *La battaglia di Legnano.*

La battaglia di Legnano

While in *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi* Verdi disguises the patriotic subject under the loose veneer of biblical and historical metaphors, *La battaglia di Legnano* is a flagrant propaganda piece. Verdi quickly wrote the opera in reaction and in support of the 1848 series of revolutions that plagued not only Italy but almost every major city in Europe.

Independently in both Milan and Venice, the people rose and dispelled the Austrian troops in 1848. In Rome, led by the revolutionary and author Mazzini, the revolutionaries deposed the political leaders, and in November the Pope fled in exile. In Rome, a republic lasted from February until July of 1849 when the French troops of Napoleon III rescued the Pope and restored his temporal powers. It is here during Rome's brief independence that Verdi conducted *Battaglia*'s premiere in January of 1849 at the Teatro Argentina.

La battaglia di Legnano is story of the Italian cities of the Po Valley uniting to defeat the conquering invader, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in 1176. While in his previous works, the political message was available through a distant allusion, here the two factions openly represent their modern equivalents. Only in the brief republic of Rome could Verdi present an opera depicting Italians rising up against their Germanic oppressors. And in the 1850's the opera only saw performances after Verdi changed the setting and renamed the characters.

In *Battaglia* the nationalistic themes are open and all-pervasive. The opera preaches Italian unity, encouraging Italians to hope despite the crushing defeats in Milan and Venice the previous year. Historically, in battle the members of the Lombard League cried "Verona" or "Milano," but in Verdi's opera they cry "Italia!" (Martin,

Aspects 14). In the fourth act, the Lombards define their homeland, 'Dall'Alpi a Cariddi echeggi vittoria' ('Victory Shall Echo from the Alps to Charybdis'). While one can be assured that twelfth century Lombards were not the least bit concerned with Sicily, Verdi could not pass an opportunity to define Italy as a tangible geographic region, from the Alps to Sicily. Again, as in *Nabucco*, history is secondary to the opportunity to evoke national unity.

Despite its later composition, in *La battaglia di legnano* the music resembles that of *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi* more so than *Ernani, Macbeth,* or one of the several other operas that premiered in the interim. *Battaglia* contains seven choruses, numerous marches, brass fanfares, and the wartime rattling of drums. And like its other Risorgimento predecessors, the opera contains identifying themes for both the opposing groups. Most famous, and most flamboyantly patriotic, is 'Viva Italia!' ostentatiously placed in the first scene of the opera. The 'Viva' theme first appears in the *sinfonia*, like 'Va, pensiero' of *Nabucco*. There the theme is first broken into rhythmic and harmonic fragments before returning in full at the end of the overture. Throughout the opera this chorus is used as a national anthem. The theme falls somewhere between a march and a hymn, and Verdi repeatedly employs it as background for dialogue and in instrumental transitions.

Patriotic rhetoric and blatant nationalistic cries echo throughout the *Battaglia*. The enemy laments 'Udite? la grande, la forte Milano' ('Do you hear? The great and powerful Milan') and imprisoned Italians celebrate 'Plaude all'arrivo Milan dei forti' ('Rejoice for the forces of Milan have arrived'). But nothing is as stirring as the final scene when the dying Arrigo sings 'Chi muore per la patria Alma sì rea non ha' ('He who

dies for his country does not have a guilty soul'). The heroic Arrigo kisses the Italian standard (the closest possible symbol of Italy as the Italian flag was banned on stage by Austrian censors) before closing his eyes in death as the chorus repeats 'Chi muore' as the orchestra, complete with organ and bells, thunders to a close (Kimbell 564).

Verdi wrote *Battaglia* immediately after he had refashioned *I Lombardi* as the grand opera *Jérusalem* for the Paris Opéra. Verdi, in Paris during the 1848 revolutions in Italy, did witness the Parisian equivalent. Under hearing of "Le Cinque Giornate" he departed Paris at once and raced to Milan. Upon arriving in the newly liberated Republic, Verdi wrote to a friend:

> "Honor to these brave men! Honor to all of Italy, which at this moment is truly great! […] Yes, yes, a few more years, perhaps only months, and Italy will be free, united, and a republic. What else should she be?"
>
> (Martin, Verdi 220)

But by the time Verdi could finish and perform *Battaglia,* the Austrians had defeated the Piedmontese army recapturing Milan, Venice, and the rest of Northern Italy. Only the Roman Republic held out, to be defeated and returned to the Papacy by the French a few months later. For Italy, 1848 was a year of incredible triumphs and devastating setbacks. But Italy's destiny was now inevitable, and the failures and tragedy of 1848 were one more step on the path to liberation.

Nationalistic Elements in Other Operas

In addition to the aforementioned operas, many of Verdi's other works contain elements of patriotic sentiments, often blatant and in the most unexpected places.

A*ttila,* first performed in 1846, is an historical allegory of Italy's occupation by a foreign nation that rivals the allegorical strength of *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi*. In the story of the fifth century invasion of the Roman Empire by the Huns, the audience easily equated the Roman Empire with a united Italy and the Huns as the conquering enemy. The line in which the Roman General says to Attila 'Avrai tu l'universo / Resti Italia a me' ('You can have the universe, leave Italy to me') quickly became an Anti-Austrian slogan. And when Austrian censorship removed the line, the audience would rise in demonstration.

Another famous patriotic chorus appears in Verdi's *Macbeth*, first performed in 1847. Although the setting of Scotland seems like the most unlikely place to find a cry for Italian unity, the chorus "O patria oppressa" (Oh, Oppressed Homeland"), sung by the exiled Scots, was immensely popular and frequently encored. The Venetian audiences would throw bouquets of red and green, the Italian colors, onstage, and after those colors were prohibited by the police, the audience threw bouquets of black and yellow, the Hapsburg colors, to watch in delight as the cast refused to pick them up (Martin, Verdi 11).

Verdi's timeless *Aida*, first performed in 1871, in many ways celebrates the newly united country. Although the country gained independence in 1860, the victory was not complete and the country not fully unified until Venice (in 1866) and Rome (in 1870) finally joined the Kingdom of Italy. The subject of the Egyptians preserving their

national solidarity, after fending off the invading Ethopians, has an obvious kinship to his Risorgimento works of the 1840's. The stirring and patriotic aria 'O patria mia' ('Oh, my Homeland'), calls not for a united country, like its counterparts in his 1840's works, but instead finally and joyously celebrates the fruition of the Risorgimento. And no line in all of Verdi's works celebrates the ideals of the Risorgimento more than the line 'Pensa che un populo vinto, straziato / per te soltanto, per te soltanto risorger può' ('Think that a people conquered and tortured / through you alone, through you alone can rise'). The scene, with the very word *risorgere* (to rise again) from which the word Risorgimento is derived, epitomizes the message Verdi strove to convey in all of his patriotic works and celebrates the final victory: the complete unification of Italy.

VIVA VERDI!

In the 1859 as the Kingdom of Sardinia, now backed by the armies of Napoleon III, prepared for another war with Austria, Italian citizens made the startling realization that Verdi's name was an acronym for the King of Italy, ***V***ittorio ***E***manuele ***R***e ***D***'***I***talia. Viva VERDI! was sketched on walls and shouted in the streets, from Palermo to Turin and in every Italian city in between. Verdi had indeed, and quite literally, become the symbol of the Risorgimento and the creation of an independent Italy. From the patrons in the opera house to soldiers on the battlefield, Italy shouted the name Verdi.

Throughout his life, Verdi was frequently asked to compose various songs or hymns. Verdi always rejected, except in two cases. In these two hymns and Verdi's brief political career demonstrate Verdi's patriotism existed offstage as well.

SUONA LA TROMBE

In 1848 from Paris, Verdi, invigorated by the recent events in Italy and his progress on *La battaglia di Legnano*, wrote his patriotic anthem "Suona la trombe" ("Sound the Trumpet"). Verdi wrote the piece, based on a poem by the Genovese poet Goffredo Mameli, upon the request of Mazzini who at the time was hiding in exile in Switzerland following the recent Austrian victory. Verdi, although dissatisfied with the hymn but wishing to fulfill his patriotic duty, sent the piece to Mazzini in late 1848. To Mazzini, Verdi writes:

> "I send you the hymn, and although a little late, I hope it will arrive soon enough. I have tried to be as popular and simple as possible. Make what use of it you think fit, and burn it if you think it unworthy. If you publish it, get the poet to change a few words at the start of the second and third verses, where it would be a good thing to write a phrase of five syllables which made sense by itself, as in all the other verses. 'Noi lo giuriamo … Suona la tromba etc … I could have set it to music as it stands, but then the music would have been difficult, and therefore less popular, and we would not have achieved our object.
>
> May this hymn soon be sung on the plains of Lombardy, amid the music of the cannon."
>
> (Osbourne 56)

Mazzini did publish the hymn, but musically weak and arriving after the armistice that restored Austrian power, it never became popular.

Inno delle nazioni

In 1862, Verdi was asked to compose a song to represent the new Kingdom of Italy at the London Exhibition. Verdi obliged, composing the cantata "Inno delle nazioni" ("Hymn of the Nations"). In the piece Verdi combines "God Save the Queen," "La Marseillaise," and to represent Italy, the hymn "Fratelli d'Italia," written by the poet Mameli during the 1848 revolutions and synonymous with the defense of the fated Roman Republic against the French in 1849. In the hymn, the ambitious Verdi attempts to place the young nation of Italy among the great powers of England and France. His choice of anthems was rather striking as "La Marseillaise" was not the national anthem of France at the time, and revolutionary hymn "Fratelli d'Italia" had nearly been forgotten. And ironically enough, after both France and Italy became republics in 1946, these two pieces were selected as their respective national anthems.

Verdi the Politician

Upon Camillo Cavour's personal and repeated requests, Verdi stood for election to the first National Parliament in 1861. Cavour was eager to have such a popular Risorgimento figurehead in the government. Repeatedly Verdi denied the request, but upon Cavour's persistence and out of sheer respect for the man he called "the father of our country," Verdi agreed, ran, and was elected as a deputy from the district of Parma. Verdi conscientiously attended the meetings in the capital of Turin, and always voted following Cavour's lead, saying "That way I can be absolutely certain of not making a mistake" (Martin, Aspects 23). In June of 1861 Cavour suddenly died, devastating the new country. Verdi dutifully finished his term, and, as his political career existed solely because of his reverence for Cavour, did not stand for re-election.

On January 27, 1901, in the Grand Hotel in Milan, the 87 year-old Giuseppe Verdi passed away from a cerebral hemorrhage. Despite Verdi's wishes for a small funeral, over 100,000 people attended singing in unison 'Va, pensiero' as a final homage to the nation of Italy's first and greatest composer.

Throughout Verdi's operas, characters sacrifice personal happiness, love, or even life itself, defending their ideals for the greater good of people. The noblest of action results in the greatest of sufferings. Verdi's music ennobled a people, a nation, to rise from the shackles of oppression to fight for the greater good of all Italians. His rather overt patriotism would capture the heart and love of a fledgling nation struggling to develop a sense of national unity. Verdi's works teach of the nobility of the human spirit.

Ideas derived from the events of the Risorgimento are universally applicable to all mankind. And it is these ideals, this nobility, that endure, as even a century after his death Verdi's operas still speak to humankind throughout the world.

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