

THE ITALIANNESSE OF ITALIAN OPERA: LITERATURE, HISTORY, POLITICS, MUSIC

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Italy gave birth to opera; it can rightfully claim sovereignty despite the entire world taking to it like fish to water. It was in the heart of Italy that experimenting and conjecturing led to the first tentative steps at composing opera at the turn of the seventeenth century. For at least three centuries after Monteverdi first sprung his *Orfeo* on an enthusiastic public, Italian composers have been assiduously participating in its continued development. They can rightly be credited with having made superlative important contributions to the genre. Despite the very valid input by such countries as France, Germany, Russia, and others, Italy's involvement with opera has had a more enduring and passionate effect than contributions by other nations.

Since Monteverdi, Italian composers and librettists have vastly enriched the world's treasure trove of opera. Italian(ate) singers have been (and still are) a point of reference for fledgling upcoming opera singers, and Italian audiences naturally share a kindred Mediterranean spirit with the exuberance and hyperbole that opera offers: opera seems to gratify both their hopes and their ideals. They have also demonstrated to listeners how best to express their appreciation or otherwise (clapping or booing respectively) during a live performance. Naturally, it is perfectly acceptable for an opera buff to show a preference to Gluck rather than Scarlatti, to Wagner rather than Verdi, to Mussorgsky instead of Puccini. However, it is the Italians who represent the mainstream. Subsequent traditions such as those emanating from France, Germany, and the Slav countries including Russia, have drunk from the main fount, a powerful source of emotional nourishment that is Italian opera. They drew their inspiration and sustenance from it, imitating it, reconfiguring it, going so far as to rebel against it. The Italian product is quintessentially opera; the genre in its most refined, most undiluted and most characteristic essence.

In a most basic manner, it is the primacy of song, of the human voice, that constitutes the foundation of Italian opera. Throughout the ages, the human voice has been regarded by the Italians as the superb instrument par excellence. Of the rare qualities championed by Aquinas and recommended by him to the upright and the honourable none was more warmly accepted by the Princes and Dukes of the Renaissance than Magnificence: these great patrons of the Arts were never more fulfilled than when displaying flamboyant and conspicuous form to their most generous instincts. Events held in aristocratic circles such as weddings, baptisms, birthdays, diplomatic successes – all were celebrated and commemorated in grand style, with pomp, circumstance, and triumph. Naturally, revelry was never too far away, and it was always a delight to find a good excuse for a party. Revels varied from occasion to occasion and from family to another. There was music, certainly, in the form of singing, dancing, and masques; there were pageants and jousting tournaments; inevitably there were also banquets that could last for three days at any one time.

Increasingly, many plays were produced during the Baroque period in Italy. Among these, the most historically relevant were revivals of comedies by Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence, most specifically produced at Ferrara. These revival productions started at the end of 1400 under the artistic patronage of Duke Ercole the First. "*Carmina te dicent scenam instaurasse poetis*" ("*Songs will declare you to have restored the stage to poetry*") prophesied the court-poet Battista Guarini.

Jumping forward a couple of hundred years to Verdi's time, one finds that the political is never really dissociated from the cultural, if only for the opportunity of using the cultural for political expediency, as indeed was the case in Verdi's time!

Verdi's Italy

(i) Politics

The unique event of the *Risorgimento* frames both Verdi's early life and the major part of his operatic career. The *Risorgimento* was an attempt at a second renaissance, a movement that tried to recapture

lost ideals of nationhood. This was a long process, commencing in 1796 with the Italian conquests of Napoleon I and stretching to the alleged unification of the country in 1870. The 1840s were the most historically important and dramatic years in this process of reviving Italy and Verdi was himself very concerned with what was happening around him. In fact, his concern was so palpable that it is difficult to engage with the works he produced in this period without contextualising them within these momentous events.

Giuseppe Verdi was born on 10 October 1813 in a village, Le Roncole, which now forms part of the province of Parma. This region of Emilia formed part of Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy, as was indeed the greater part of the whole of Italy. The country was fragmented into multiple regions, some of which, namely, Parma, Toscana, Piemonte, Umbria had been taken over by the French Empire at the turn of the nineteenth century, more precisely between 1800 and 1808. Napoleon proclaimed himself King of other regions, most notably those at the North, namely, Lombardia and the Veneto which, together with a large part of central Italy had been incorporated into a hastily put together Kingdom of Italy; this dated from 1805. Last but not least, since 1806, the officially independent southern part of the country, the Kingdom of Naples, had been a state subordinate first to Joseph Bonaparte, elder brother of the more famous Napoleon, and subsequently to Marshal Murat who was their brother-in-law.

However, despite the spread of the Napoleonic Empire, its demise was fast approaching. The Russian campaign failed spectacularly and news of this catastrophe reached Italy by the end of 1812. This was hotly pursued by the Battle of Leipzig a year later. Italian feeling was rife with hopes of liberation and nationhood despite the best efforts of the Napoleonic rulers in the country struggling to safeguard their own political destinies and disengaging their aspirations from those of the clearly-waning Emperor. Despite the passion and enthusiasm at seeing the proverbial light at the end of a long tunnel, however, there was no co-ordinated or organised popular movement to expel the French. In fact, in a strange twist of historical contingency, Napoleonic Italy did not collapse through any willed effort by the Italians. It was through yet another invasion by the Austrians in Italy's Northern states together with the ramifications of Napoleon's failures in northern and central Europe which liberated Italy of its French sovereignty. Therefore, it was by accident rather than design that Italy got to be governed, namely, it was the powers that defeated Napoleon which decided at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 who should govern what and where. These powers were Austria, Russia, Prussia, and Britain.

Legitimacy was the guiding principle against which this important decision was taken. It was a principle that was applied with eager and bureaucratic meticulousness.² The decision stipulated that neither Genoa nor Venice could retain their ancient tradition of republican governance. However, this was an exception rather than the rule, and the results of the Congress of Vienna permitted the restoration of the whole panoply of Princes, Dukes, Kings and other titled persons, a list that was decimated by Napoleon's conquests. The Austrian Metternich ruled the Lombardia and the Veneto regions, which were annexed to the Austrian Empire; Piemonte had its original owners, the Savoyard Kings, restored; the Spanish Bourbons took over Naples; Pope Pius IX was reinstated as sovereign over the Papal states, stretching from Rome to the Po; the duchies of Lucca and Parma were granted nominal independence while Austrian Archdukes took control over Modena and the Toscana. This colourful conglomeration of states was, thus, the system of Italian government that prevailed in Verdi's early and young age, a system that was not seriously challenged for more than three decades.

Despite this overhaul in governance, with an outdated and outmoded political system of confirmed incompetence reinstated in 1815, together with a few sovereigns not least among them Vittorio Emanuele II of Piemonte reclaiming his inheritance in an ostentatious style that was hardly without its reactionary thrust, the residue of Napoleonic rule lingered. Remnants of the more autonomous Napoleonic system of governance remained and, in fact, initially the reinstated Austrian government in Lombardia and the Veneto tried to rule in a more efficacious and liberal manner than even Napoleon and his representatives had done. Yet, the singular legacy that was handed down by the Napoleonic code of law was less tangible than just legal and bureaucratic competence and ability. It was something beyond the mere enthusiasm of having the space and the opportunity to grasp opportunity in a meritocratic system of governance. What resounds and re-echoes down the corridors of *Risorgimento* history is the dynamic exhilaration and aspiration for the freedom and heroism that Napoleon had projected. The despotic randomness with which he had divided the country, together with the barbaric massacres in which he had implicated his own people were more or less relegated to the history books. However, the tone and idealism which had shone like a beacon throughout the country in his time created a sense of nostalgia in the Italians, themselves readily subjected to emotional longing for a lost past. This was a

feeling which in the very first years of the *Risorgimento* nurtured secret societies such as the *Carboneria*.

Superficially, the years immediately following the 1815 Congress of Vienna were ones of fatalistic incompetence in Italy. At odd moments, however, this inexplicable indolence burst into vigour: the disenchantment and hostilities of the nation surfaced and rebellion inevitably followed. The power of native patriotism, the pride taken in local mores and traditions which were always guarded jealously, a habitual mutual mistrust between regions which were instrumental in bringing about the 1821 failures – all these factors were big problems that needed to be addressed by those who championed Italian unification. Italy had been fragmented for far too long. Important cities such as Rome, Florence, Naples, Venice, and others had for hundreds of years been centres of commercial activity, of the artistic and intellectual life. It was understandable that for any one city to sacrifice local satisfaction and pride in its own achievement and to offer some degree of freedom to the greater good of the country was not easy for them. Many regarded national unification a utopian ideal. The then British Ambassador in Florence, Lord Burghersh believed that

no measure could be so hurtful or unpopular as the forming of their country into one Kingdom. The different states into which it has so long been divided have separated the feelings and the interests of the people. The inhabitants of no separate country hate each other more thoroughly than those of the neighbouring states of Italy.³

In 1831, Bologna triggered a few failed revolts. Following on this, Giuseppe Mazzini organised the first of numerous mutinous insurgencies. It was soon felt that under an inspiring albeit revolutionary guidance, the different states started coming together in a spirit of a shared destiny. By the time the big revolution erupted in 1848, it was more the ideological and cultural achievement of the years leading up to it rather than the political that consolidated a series of events that could only have one inevitable end, namely, the independence and unification of Italy. The comprehensive animosity shared among the different states towards Austria was undoubtedly a matter that was conducive to a fostered spirit of nationhood. Although only the northern regions of Lombardia and the Veneto were directly under the sovereignty of Austria, in 1821 the people of the Piemonte and of Naples, and ten years later the various citizens living in the Papal States had all witnessed Austrian involvement in the suppression of popular movements in their respective states. Austria, therefore, was increasingly emerging as the villain in this saga, while the heroes were those who nurtured and disseminated Italian idealism and national self-consciousness. A leading figure among these ideologists was Mazzini, whom history remembers less for his doomed revolts to overthrow autocracy than for his writings which he used to infuse patriotic passion in his fellow countrymen. He argued that no obstacle should remain that would impede the unification of a country that shared a common heritage in terms of both culture and religion. In one way or another, as seems to be the prerogative of revolutions, the leading figures were thinkers rather than doers. Among these one finds Massimo D’Azeglio, a sharp politician with an aversion to the cut-throat methods he invariably acquainted with Mazzini. He was a celebrated novelist in his time who regarded patriotic literature as the tool to inspire the nation. There was also the unarguably more famous Alessandro Manzoni who not only wrote one of the great novels of his time, namely, *I Promessi Sposi*, but spent the best part of ten years or so editing and reconfiguring it in a manner that would be instrumental in giving Italy a shared national language. Then there was also Giuseppe Verdi.

Despite moderation being largely exercised in these years, typically the Italians were in a highly-strung state. This excitement is foregrounded in 1846, two years before the big revolution erupted, when the volatile and repressive incumbent Pope Gregory XVI was succeeded by Pope Pius IX (Pio Nono). Granting amnesty to all prisoners incarcerated for political reasons became normal practice under the new Pope. He also made huge reforms in the administration of the states falling under his jurisdiction although in all fairness these had been instigated by and forced upon his predecessor by the five powers who had signed the Congress of Vienna in 1815.⁴ In 1846, however, given the climate of patriotism prevailing across Italy, the people decided to regard these changes as gestures signalling a thirst for freedom, with the consequence that rather unwillingly Pio Nono emerged one of the many heroes of the nationalist movement. Perhaps one of the more famous anecdotes that associate the music of Verdi with the spirit of the *Risorgimento* happened in Bologna in 1846. In the finale of Act III of his opera *Ernani*, the chorus erupts into a type of chorale announcing “A Pio nono sia Gloria e onor”.⁵

(ii) Artistic Life

Artistic life in Italy has always been foremost in its people’s consciousness, and never more so than in the years following the 1815 restoration of the states to its previous Kings and Dukes. The unique brand of

Italian Romanticism was forged in these years, a period that was formative in Verdi's artistic inclinations and which nurtured his fledgling imagination.

The *Lettera semiseria di Grisostomo* of Giovanni Berchet served more or less as the manifesto for this Romantic spirit. This was published in 1816, and in the following two years *Il Conciliatore*, a widely-disseminated literary journal, provided the much-needed space for the debating of the ideological and technical issues related to this new movement. Berchet's writings and *Il Conciliatore* were visionary in their insights regarding the concerns of an entire age of Italian literature. In a number of contexts, 'Romanticism' as a term is, at best, one of inexplicable ambivalence. Despite this, Manzoni is correct to state that all over Italy, and most specifically "in Milan, where it has been talked about more and for a longer time than elsewhere, the word 'Romanticism' has been adopted, if I am not mistaken ... to represent a combination of ideas more rational, better organized and more comprehensive than in any other place".⁶ At the time Manzoni was writing his ideas about the subject he was quite certain that the balance was tipped in favour of the negative aspects of Romanticism in Italy rather than the positive. He stresses a number of deficiencies, among them Romanticism's "tendency to exclude ... the use of mythology ... the servile imitation of the classics ... rules based not on general principles but on special cases, on the authority of the rhetoricians and not on reason, and especially the rule of the so-called dramatic unities of time and place attributed to Aristotle."⁷

In the previous century, the devotion to the cult of the classics and particularly of the influence of mythology on the creative mind, coupled with concerns of harmonious agreement of expression and proportion of form and structure, had been prerequisites in Italy's literary output, as it had been even more forcibly in England. These and other similar preoccupations had been particularly fostered in the numerous utopian institutions and academies all over Italy. Feelings of restlessness against a world of literature that appeared to develop into an even more precious and rarefied forum were already in evidence in the last few decades of the eighteenth century. However, it took the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and its consequences to trigger a comprehensive literary rebellion that resulted from the disenchantment felt with the utopian classical tradition. This revolt was engaged with in the name change and truth against a style that had separated literature from the reality of life as these rebellious people were living. They also felt that this antique idiom, in its being immersed in the cult of perfect beauty was obstructing the rejuvenation and renaissance of the common language.

It did not take very long for Romanticism in Italy to develop its own particular, national style. However, initially it was heavily under the influence of Romantic literature emerging from northern Europe. In fact, one of the more salient features of Romanticism was its cosmopolitanism. Since the Baroque period, Italy had led the way and had been a powerful source of inspiration for much of European artistic life. Such had been Italy's prevailing influence on other powerful nations, most notably France, England and Germany, that it hardly ever thought of asking what it could glean from artists operating in neighbouring and not so neighbouring countries. Yet, the mood and climate change in the first decades of the nineteenth century. This was a period when the glorious distinction that Italian culture had enjoyed since the Renaissance was no longer an accepted virtue, and its hitherto idiosyncratic self-sufficiency was increasingly beginning to be regarded as mere provincialism. Main figures of Italian literary Romanticism urged their peers to do all it takes to make their country once again the leader of European culture, or at least to bring it back into the mainstream. One way of doing this, they believed, was by translating the works of the greatest foreign writers, both classical and modern.

Again and again the leaders of literary Romanticism emphasized the need to bring Italy back into the mainstream of European culture, especially by providing translations of the greatest foreign authors, ancient and modern. Among the first to stress the importance of providing such translations together with the part these could play in reinvigorating what they felt was a dormant and stale national literary life was Madame de Staël. In fact, her essay entitled 'De l'esprit des traductions' caused a polemical flurry when it appeared in Italy in 1816.

Later that same year, Berchet published *Lettera semiseria*, in which he asserted a similar idea to Madam de Staël's albeit in more vigorous tones: "Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe, are as much *Italiani di patria* as Dante, Tasso and Ariosto".⁸ This preoccupation with having access, via translation, to foreign works was not limited to professional writers only. Mazzini himself published a philosophical essay, 'Saggio sul dramma storico' in 1830. Here, he makes a case for the merits of a much-desired and much-needed Italian theatre, stressing the didactic and educational value of works in translation. In particular, he had in mind translations of the Greek tragedians, Shakespeare and Schiller. In fact, in

Italy, the first few decades of the nineteenth century see the creating of an enormous canon of translations which, retrospectively, must surely rank as one of the more extraordinary accomplishments of Italian Romanticism. Added to this, post-1815, it was specifically this engagement with newly-accessed works that enabled the powers of literary revolt to take on the mantra of the patriotic movement, the upholders of Italian cultural life and cultural self-esteem.

However, this claim could not be sustained for very long. Truly great authors in Italy were irked by this unprecedented interest in importing foreign writers and they quickly showed that they would not be thrilled in fawning imitations of Shakespeare or Schiller, of Homer or even their own Metastasio. Largely speaking, Italians did not mince their words or their feelings when it came to expressing opinion on the more spooky gothic manifestations of northern Romanticism. In fact, they expressed profound distaste for what Manzoni called “a conglomeration of witches and banshees, an ordered disorder, a *recherché* extravagance, an abdication of common sense”.⁹

Even Shakespeare bore the brunt of Italian indignation. The Bard’s prestige among most Romantic writers is legendary: he “was by himself a force of authority large and powerful enough to balance the entire Classical Age, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century”.¹⁰ However, despite the obvious staring in their faces, Italian critics favoured the moral and the historical while downplaying elements in Shakespeare’s works which they felt were fantastic. Even Verdi himself found himself at the bitter receiving end of the critics’ vituperative pen when he was inspired to compose an opera faithfully adhering to Shakespeare’s ‘gothic’ *Macbeth*. The chastisement came from arguably one of Italy’s greatest satirical poet of the time, namely, Giuseppe Giusti. Shortly after the first performance of *Macbeth* on 14 March 1847 in Florence, Giusti wrote Verdi a letter, saying that “The gothic is that which submits the creative imagination to the test. That which is real and true subjects not only the imagination but also the heart to the test”.¹¹

Untypically, most probably there was a huge number of Italian opera lovers who were bent on realism to find themselves being exhilarated about the gothic apparatus of cursing witches, screaming banshees and vengeful ghosts. Like Manzoni, they most likely that the fantastic was an insult to rational sense and good taste. Then there was the religious premise, which put obstacles in the way of accepting other features of Romanticism attracting writers in northern countries. These aspects came in the form of the *Weltschmerz* associated with Lord Byron, among others. Yet, Italian Romantic writers disagreed passionately with their English and German counterparts on matters that went beyond the joys and despairs of the hypersensitive Shelley or Werther. Unlike what was happening in England and despite the fact that Germany itself was in the throes of a bloody revolution in its attempt to unify its country, Italian Romantics were obsessed with ideals of freedom and unification. This notion made them regard literature as a collective tool that unites the nation, with emphasis placed on history, culture, and religion, rather than as a means to exhibit individuality that would necessarily isolate the artist-hero from the crowd. This stance is markedly different from the typical uniqueness of the English Byronic hero. Readers never find this type of hero preoccupied with home rule in the first decades of the nineteenth century England; his conquests are of an entirely different nature. The manner in which the Italian notion of a unified country qualified the exhilaration for northern Romanticism could perhaps be best identified in Mazzini’s literary essays. Mazzini’s essay entitled ‘Byron and Goethe’ best exemplifies this idea. In it he asks what could possibly lie behind the notion of suffering and indignation that Byronic heroes undergo:

They are alone; this is the secret of their wretchedness and impotence.... They have never realized the conception of Humanity in the multitude that have preceded, surround and will follow after them; never thought on their own place between the past and future; on the continuity of labour that unites all the generations into one Whole.... In our own day, we are beginning, though vaguely, to foresee this new social poetry, which will soothe the suffering soul by teaching it to rise towards God through Humanity.¹²

Both Giusti and Mazzini articulate the contradictions between their native Romanticism and that of northern countries. The former countered notions of the ‘fantastic’ with concepts of the ‘true’, while the latter balanced Byronic narcissism with ideas about social poetry. Within the wider political and cultural framework, one understands that once the obstacle placed by the classicising utopians had been overcome, Italian Romantics started to have doubts whether the term ‘Romanticism’ was actually the right one to define their own hopes and interests. They started to look for and to use terms such as *letteratura nazionale e moderna*. This way of putting it was certainly more laborious than ‘Romanticism’ and equally less magic-inducing. However, it does articulate a definitive break with the utopian tradition exemplified in other forms embraced by north European Romantics. An important place was also located for the Catholic Church within this *letteratura nazionale e moderna*. This new Restoration was

identified by a reactionary response against both the paganism that was so influential in the eighteenth century and the materialism inevitably associated with the revolutionary years. In this regard, Italy was following in France's footsteps. Even those few citizens who were immeasurably irked by the restoring of the legitimate rulers were on the other hand overjoyed at the restoration of religious sovereignty of the Church. Political reaction is not necessarily or even remotely connected to what is known as neo-Guelphism in Italy. It was characteristic of the Italian citizen to wish to bring together the teachings of the Church with the more material needs of humanity, an idea which is itself utopian. The mood governing the religious fervour of the time was succinctly expressed by De Sanctis as "the famous tripartite structure, namely, liberty, equality, fraternity, suitably and equitably evangelised".¹³

The Italian Romantics' religious concerns are not automatically reflected in works that carry a religious meaning or message. It is more relevant to view their preoccupations as directed towards perceiving the hand of providence throughout the unfolding of the historical process – this coincides more pertinently with the political hopes and desires of the *Risorgimento*. There was a sort of latent belief, a new one, in oxymoronic historical miracles, as it were. Momentous historical events were no longer understood or made intelligible in terms of free will. On seeing Napoleon,

... nui
Chiniam la fronte al Massimo
Fattor, che volle in lui
Del creator suo spirito
Più vasta orma stampar.¹⁴

The Romantic period in Italy is characterised by profuse publications of art that are historically inspired and relevant: novels, plays, and paintings. In this historically-binding climate, what appeared to be remote, arcane, fantastic, and mysterious became a rare commodity.¹⁵ Naturally, it would be unwise to assume that this sense of providential ordering was important to all Italian artists as it was to someone like Manzoni, for instance. Yet, by engaging with their past, Italian Romantics could grasp the ideas on which their own hopes for the unification of their country rested. They could understand the mistakes and follies that had in all probability resulted in their current crisis and very often they could identify figures that would come across as exemplars for the new *Risorgimento* man.

D'Azeglio marks the point at which the political and cultural aims became of utmost importance in the historical literature being produced in this period. However, even the most punctilious and scrupulous artist was able to interpret the nation's past as a just reflection of the present. In fact, a choral interjection from Manzoni's own *Conte di Carmagnola* shows this:

D'una terra son tutti: un linguaggio
Parlan tutti: fratelli li dice
Lo straniero: il commune lignaggio
A ognun d'essi dal volto traspar.
Questa terra fu a tutti nudrice,
Questa terra di snague ora intrisa,
Che natura dall'altre ha divisa,
E recinta con l'Alpe e col mar.

With this pivotal preoccupation of mid-nineteenth-century Italian literature, it would be safe to argue that Italian Romanticism becomes the cultural yardstick of the *Risorgimento*. That history inspires literature, in the sense that literature is most of the time the consequence of the political, cultural, and social conditions of the society in which it was produced, that the artist was not a solitary 'vates' conjuring exquisite artefacts out of the rarefied atmosphere of his proverbial ivory tower, but someone who was adept at concretising the feelings and aspirations of a kindred people, had been the most reverently-held premise of the beliefs of the Italian Romantics, since the publication of *Il Conciliatore*. Inevitably, then, literature that was either influenced by the hopes of or directly inspired by the *Risorgimento* expressed the entire spectrum from cheap propaganda to transmitting a didactic message to the Italians. At one end, one could find anti-Austrian sentiments expressed in references that could be enjoyed in a few of the more well-attended theatres in Milano; at the other end, one could find episodes in D'Azeglio, Carducci, the librettist Cammarano and, of course, Verdi himself, describing in detail the famous Battle of Legnano, arguably one of the more glorious triumphs that adorn Italian mediaeval history. Anywhere between these extreme points was a steady output of what could be understood as a refined journalism.

An authorised anthology of Italian poetry of the time would readily show how poets engaged in celebrating both the failures and the success of incidents associated with the *Risorgimento*.¹⁶ The poet's urge of belonging in fellowship with his people, a deep-seated belief that his mission is to communicate ideas and ideals, is perhaps one of the more impressive and commendable features of Italian Romanticism. Perhaps in no other European country did the extraordinary accomplishments in the arts, mainly in literature and music, manage to nourish spiritually and culturally an overwhelming majority of citizens. The dictum that "art, like truth, should be accessible to all" was a belief embraced by many writers and musicians, not least by Manzoni and Verdi.

In fact, arguably, at no other time in Italian history was literature so much a product of its time, with extracts from the plays of Manzoni recited and literally sung by volunteers demonstrating on the streets of Milan right in the heart of the 1848 revolution. Indeed, it is said that, allegedly, a border guard from Genoa emerged from a carriage reciting yards of prose from memory from Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* when the writer was travelling to Florence in 1827. This was the climate, both political and cultural, that made Verdi's early operas unique, both in kind and in degree.

The love of and for music is widespread in Italy. Italians are in love with opera, which seems to be the favourite national pastime. In Milano alone, the nineteenth century saw the building of no fewer than four theatres and auditoriums in which opera productions were regularly held. This fashion was not particular to Milano alone but was adopted also by other cosmopolitan cities across the country. Lady Blessington records that "in every Genoese street, children and adults alike could be heard singing the melodies of Rossini with a pleasure that is unknown save in the sunny south."¹⁸ During his Italian travels, specifically in 1846, Dickens's *vetturino* "had a few kind words and many more smiles ... for all the farm lasses, and bits and pieces of the *Sonnambula* for all the echoes."¹⁹ Dickens, on these same travels, also found in Carrara, an industrial city of note, that Bellini and Donizetti operas were as vital to the well-being of the people there as Handel's *Messiah* was to similar industrial cities in the north of England. In fact, he writes that "it is an amusing tradition there to have a choir of workmen in the marble quarries ... these do not have formal education but are largely self-taught and sing very musically by ear. I heard them perform both in a comic opera and in Bellini's *Norma*; and they acquitted themselves admirably."²⁰ The librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni comments that in Milan, the opera house was the "prime concern of cultured society."²¹ As Stendhal observed, it was "the salon of the city. Society is nowhere but here. Whatever business needs to be conducted, including financial and commercial, people would tell one another 'We will see you at *La Scala*.'"²² *La Scala* was the pride of Milan and its people; it still is. It occupied pole position, and the experience of artists who were employed there in the *Risorgimento* years is succinctly summed up by D'Azeglio:

I am writing [*Nicolo de' Lapi*] ... to stir up the Italians and to call their attention to matters rather more important than the contracts of ballerinas and singers. However, I hasten to admit that I did not for a moment dream of playing the dirty trick on the impresarios of emptying the great *La Scala*. I realized that not only did the great performers exert an irresistible tyranny over the spirits of the Milanese, but that everything related to *La Scala* ... was at that time in Milan a matter of far keener interest and affection than the whole crowd of us artists or writers. Also, in this connection one must pay tribute to the refinement and shrewdness of the Austrian government. For years they could be said to have governed Lombardy by means of *La Scala*, and one has to admit that for some time they succeeded well.²³

(iii) *Nabucco* – A *Risorgimento* Opera?

In November 1889, marking the fiftieth year of Verdi's operatic debut, Carducci wrote:

With the initial stirrings of his youthful genius Giuseppe Verdi anticipated and announced the rejuvenation of the motherland. Oh melodies memorable and reverent to anyone privileged to be born before the '48!²⁴

By "the initial stirrings of his youthful genius", Carducci would not have meant *Oberto* as *Nabucco*. Critics, then as today, have never been in doubt that musically, *Nabucco* is a point of reference in Verdi's career. Doubt is also dispelled with regard to where the importance of this opera lay. In the most emphatic of ways, this opera placed Verdi on the topmost rung of the cultural ladder; among other matters, largely conceptual and musical in nature, with this opera Verdi demonstrated in full view of his beloved audiences and detractors alike his peculiar brand of robustness and nostalgia, sentiments that reflected in operatic language the widespread crisis of contemporary Italy. Temistocle Solera was the librettist for *Nabucco*, and he structured the libretto in a manner and style that would give a receptive audience an array of strong

situations reflecting in detail their own prevailing condition. *Nabucco*, thus, became quite simply the most important and relevant opera of the time, one in which the anger, aspirations, and mood of the *Risorgimento* resonated most realistically and forcefully. Concurrently, it inevitably initiated a number of precedents, from a dramatic point of view. The opera *Nabucco* and others that followed it which are equally adherent to the *Risorgimento* ideals share a few common aspects. These will be discussed in broad terms before the opera in question, namely, *Nabucco*, is analysed in some detail.

One aspect that these operas appear to share is the tendency to build dramatic intensity out of a crisis shared by the society (in opera this would be the chorus) in question. This means that unlike the later grand operas of Verdi, for instance, such as an *Aida* or a *Don Carlos*, the conflict is not the prerogative of a small group of particular idiosyncratic individuals amongst whom one finds the proverbial hero (in opera these would be the soloists). Rather, the conflict is a situation shared by one and all equally. This does not detract from the importance of these idiosyncratic individuals, who will be present throughout the unfolding of the drama and without whom the tragic moment would likely not survive. However, their destinies will be uncompromisingly and intricately connected with those of their people. This is very much like Homeric and Anglo-Saxon epic: when the hero is vanquished entire societies are dispersed. In this regard, *Nabucco* is not just about Nabucco, Abigaille and Fenena; it involves a confrontation between Hebrews and Babylonians, as *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata* is a war between Crusaders and Saracens, and *Alzira* one between Spaniards and Peruvians. The sense of nationhood, together with the religious, cultural, and historical basis on which it is built, are primary tenets in operas of this period.

Where drama is markedly different from the novel produced during the *Risorgimento* is in its duty, as it were, to wear a disguise. Unlike what a French composer of the period would have done, Verdi does not focus on Babylon or Assyria because he was looking for the exotic, but because only by resorting to such locations can he create a meta-language that would cleverly reflect the authentic feelings of his people. It is recalled that dramatic, in the sense of theatrical, topics borrowed from Italian history were foremost in the list that attracted ruthless censorship. The patriotic enthusiasm triggered in one person who would have read in private a historical novel by either a D'Azeglio or a Guerrazzi was already a worry for the authorities, albeit a minor one. To permit such feelings to be stirred in an entire audience and beyond would be rabble rousing; hence the importance of the mask, the disguise.

Drama could only *pretend* to be about some historically or geographically alien, hostile, or remote nation. Only then could composers, librettists, singers, and actors give vent to the actual worries afflicting nineteenth-century Italy:

Oh, mia patria sì bella e perduta!
Oh, membranza sì cara e fatal!

This, allegedly, is a chorus of exiled Hebrews of the 6BC in *Nabucco*.

Maledetti cui spinge rea voglia
Fuor del cerchio che il Nume ha segnato!

Also, this apparently anti-monarchist verse expresses the feelings of a fifteenth-century French people in *Giovanna d'Arco*. As Verdi himself puts it, "Unfortunately ... if we want to be effective through our art, we need, shamefully, to resort to foreign things."²⁵ That said, however, it would be an exercise in over-simplification if one were to even suggest that Verdi's 1840s operas were just allegories of the crisis contemporary Italy was enduring. As a musician of note, even in his time, Verdi's primary concerns were with his music and his characters not with political ideological conflicts. It thus frequently occurs that the oppressors, such as the Nabuccos and the Attilas, take away the limelight from those who would embrace the pan-Italian ideology. In *Attila*, for instance, the personages who at any given moment would represent the highest patriotic notions would, in no time at all, be themselves perpetrators of base intrigues – a pattern that, unfortunately, has repeated itself all too often throughout history. At the time that Verdi was composing these operas, this fact upset no-one. Unlike current practice, the circumstances of theatre life in Verdi's time dictated that opera was produced to be enjoyed by the people who frequented it. Audiences would react with unique abandon to the passions emanating from any given dramatic situation; they would applaud or boo individual arias, choruses, the production, and more. Thus, it was not the sophisticated genre we know today, subject to serious critical debate and analysis. So, rather than regarding *Nabucco* as a fully-fledged allegory on the *Risorgimento*, in its

Liù

con dolorosa espressione

Tu che di gel sei cinta,

Andantino mosso $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$
(con un poco d'agitazione)
con dolorosa espressione

time it would have been seen as a mode of entertainment, ideologically non-prejudicial, but sporadically punctuated with episodes that simmer with the passions of the *Risorgimento*.

However, of all the operas composed in this period, it would be safe to say that *Nabucco* maintains the innuendos of the *Risorgimento* most religiously. Throughout the Verdi canon, no other opera compels a country and its people, as both a religious and a political entity, to occupy the stage so persistently and comprehensively. No other Verdi opera allows its protagonists, individual and collective, to consistently act as tropes of political and religious actualities. Also, no other opera makes use of a musical language so irrevocably infused with a panoply of the most well-known military marches and popular hymnody. Possibly because of fear of rigorous censorship, dramatic reconfiguring of Old Testament stories was uncommon in *Risorgimento* Italy. Therefore, prior to *Nabucco*, there is just one single opera based on a Biblical text, namely, *Mosè in Egitto* by Rossini, a work that had achieved for itself a quasi-cult status, deeply embedded in the operatic canon. In the present context, however, two other dramatic but distinctly non-operatic works can be found which deal with the story of the ancient Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar.

The well-known, erudite Florentine dramatist, Giovanni Battista Niccolini, wrote the first *Nabucco* which was published in 1819. Critics who state that Niccolini's *Nabucco* is completely different from Verdi's are correct. That said, however, like Verdi's *Nabucco*, Niccolini's work does offer a paradigm against which the religious and political situation of contemporary Italy could be judged, again via a tale gleaned from a remote and exotic past. In fact, the published version of Niccolini's drama contains a key for unravelling the story of *Nabucco*. One can find the names and titles of individual characters which are clearly depicted in two vertical columns. On the left-hand side there are the names in their ancient Babylonian style, while on the right-hand side there are their contemporary European counterparts. For instance, Assyria is the ancient name, with its contemporary equivalent being the French Empire; Phoenicia is substituted with England, and Egypt with Prussia. Nebuchadnezzar himself is actually Napoleon while his high priest, Mitrane, now becomes Pope Pius VII, the Pontiff who crowned Napoleon, lost the Papal States to the

newly-crowned Emperor, excommunicated him, was taken prisoner by him, and actually managed to survive to witness the restoration of the Papal States to their rightful heir after Napoleon's defeat. Niccolini, like Mazzini, was a vigorous republican who also expressed anti-clerical sentiments in his writings. He used the personage of Nebuchadnezzar to instigate a debate addressing the relationship between State and Church, together with the abolition of tyranny – ideas that were later echoed by both Solera and Verdi.

Yet, prior to Niccolini's work, another reconfiguring of the Nebuchadnezzar tale had made its way to the Italian theatre. This was Antonio Cortesi's ballet entitled *Nabucodonosor*, which was premiered at the historic *La Scala* in the Autumn of 1838. Reading the Preface to the programme booklet it is made abundantly clear that this Ballet was not an entirely original adaptation of the story. It was in fact based on a very successful French drama by Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu, a work that had premiered in Paris two years before Cortesi's ballet in Milano. Solera was inspired for his libretto by this play, and the scenery and costumes of this French drama also influenced Merelli for his first production of Verdi's opera.

Cortesi's ballet appeared to have been specifically commissioned for the 1838 Autumn season. It was a fully-fledged five-act work. Thus, it can be regarded as the major work of the Coronation season at the famous *La Scala*, the season which saw the crowning of the Austrian Emperor, Ferdinand I, as King of Lombardia and Venetia, an event that took place at the Cathedral in Milano. This extravagant and opulent event is largely regarded by Italian critics and historians as one of the proudest moments of post-1815, the event that sealed the power and stature of the Austrians in the north of Italy. In the final count, the sacred symbolism with which the coronation ceremony was infused appeared to have extinguished the flickering embers of the revolution definitively.

It is not easy to believe that Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu, and later Cortesi, modelled their works as allegories of Restoration political ideology on the same lines that Niccolini had devised his as representative of Napoleonic political strategy. That said, however, both the play and the ballet emerge out of a difficult time of religious and political affirmation, and in the relatively straightforward gestures of the ballet it is even more clear than in the drama that the prevailing themes are the interdependence of State and Church and the providential power of faith.

The ballet has three main protagonists, namely, Nabucco and his two daughters called Abigaille and Fenena. The former is actually the offspring of a slave but this is kept a secret. There are also two nations representing two different religious entities: the Jews worship Jehovah while the Babylonians worship Baal. Following the defeat and destroying of Jerusalem by Nabucco with the attendant exile of the Jews to Babylon, Nabucco's daughter Fenena is ordered to rule as regent in Babylon until her father returns. However, the Babylonians had not bargained for the fact that in her father's absence, Fenena would endear herself increasingly to the Jews and their faith. The consortium of priests in Babylon, therefore, have no choice but to find support in Abigaille. She readily gives them her sympathy and together they try to oust Fenena from her position as regent and install Abigaille as queen. On returning to Babylon, Nabucco full of pride in his victories is immediately enraged at what he understands to be high treason on the part of the priests of Baal. In fury, he dictates the eradication of the old gods.

Nabucco now decrees that from now on his own effigy would be revered in Babylon in lieu of the old gods. At this pronouncement, the King who would be God is hit by a thunderbolt, allegedly divinely ordained. Greatly weakened and in mental turmoil, he is no position to oppose the power of Abigaille and the priests of Baal when these consolidate their power. Had Fenena not formalised her conversion to the faith of the Jews, their [the Jews'] difficult situation would be extremely difficult. Nabucco is profoundly moved by Fenena and the Jews' faith, which proclaims them loyal unto martyrdom. In this contrite mood, Nabucco prays for forgiveness to the true God. His mental faculties together with his physical strength, and eventually his kingdom, are fully restored. The ballet comes to a close with Nabucco reinstated as King of Babylonia, leading his people in prayer and worship of the rightful God of Israel.

The irony is not lost on readers when one realises that the alliance of Verdi and Solera should have brought forth the quintessential opera of the *Risorgimento* out of the massive structure that is Restoration art. It is even more impressive that the plot of the drama is unchanged: it neatly fits the political bill of the times. Only very few of the alterations made by the librettist were intentionally

implemented with the aim to politicise the context. Other changes made were necessary from a musical point of view, keeping in mind the singers for whom the opera was originally modelled on. A line by line translation of Cortesi's ballet would have necessitated the presence of two prima donnas instead of one (a stiff and unenviable contention). This is because Cortesi gives equal weight to Abigaille and Fenena. As is well known, Verdi's opera gives a much more subordinate role to Fenena; Abigaille is given both musical as well as dramatic sovereignty throughout. In the ballet, on the other hand, both her love affair with Ismaele and her religious-political relationship with the priests of Baal are given a more central role in the ballet.

There is a sense of a rigid hierarchy in the story and it is nothing short of a stroke of genius that Solera opts to foreground the fanatical and cruel Boadicean Abigaille for his leading lady rather than the more feminine and gentle Fenena. However, this choice, together with focusing on one major male role (that of the baritone Nabucco rather than the tenor Ismaele), was also limiting, forcing Solera to explore the whole gamut of emotional intensity in Abigaille. He gives her a romantic past that puts her in contention with Fenena for Ismaele's affections²⁶ and at the opera's close the denouement is nothing short of epic. She is not struck dead – and here there is a marked departure from both Cortesi and the French dramatists who followed on his example – but afflicts her with a bout of madness that eventually softens the heart as well as the mind. It is admitted that these extra scenes (there are only a few) are clumsily inserted, especially with regard to theatrical mechanics. However, it is these scenes that allow the catharsis in Abigaille, enabling her to develop into a fully rounded character much as King Lear does as a result of his mad scenes and eventually renewal.

The wild, highly-strung passion that borders on the fanatic and the neurotic with which she commands the stage through most of the opera, and which is a key for Verdi with regard to his musical structure and organisation, becomes more profoundly inspired and when the tragic end takes place it becomes more heroic and epic.²⁷ The dramatic effectiveness of the opera almost entirely depends on the roles of Nabucco, Abigaille, and the chorus. The great moments of heightened emotional intensity, namely, the grand finales of the first two Acts together with the magnificent duet in Act III completely depend for their power on the dramatic presence and involvement of either one or the other of these two protagonists or of both combined. However, readers should not over-read and find in this analysis a direct equivalent of the *Risorgimento*, which is the main thrust of this paper's argument. To engage with how the librettist strikes that key in his drama, as it were, the reader needs to understand how he deals with the two factions in his story, namely, the religious and the national, and to comprehend how he treats the Hebrews. The chorus in this opera plays a most important role, perhaps more than in any other opera in the canon. It is a most demanding role, as much as that of one of the protagonists. Below I have transcribed those excerpts in which the Hebrews, as both a religious category as well as a national one, are involved directly in the unfolding of the drama. The transcription is made from Cortesi's scenes.

First Act: Hebrews, led by the high priest Zaccaria, plead divine help. The Jewish combatant, Ismaele, leads a group of soldiers. He walks on stage sharing the devastating news that Nabucco, having burst through the city gates was at that moment making headway for the temple, laying waste to everything and everyone in his wake. The Hebrews have taken Nabucco's daughter, Fenena, prisoner and they want to exact revenge and kill her. She unwaveringly offers herself to be executed but Ismaele protects her; he will not sanction the murder. At that moment, Nabucco's arrival is declared. Zaccaria orders Ismaele and his soldiers to shield the sacred temple. Ismaele once again protects the prisoner when for the second time in a few minutes she is almost killed. There is a collective curse on Ismaele whose sword is snatched by Zaccaria and breaks it in two.

Second Act: The High Priest presents the Hebrews to Fenena, who is Regent, but on noticing the presence of Ismaele they admonish him because in their eyes he is the only reason why they are in exile. Ismaele throws a fit of utter despair and only calms down when Fenena pronounces he had rescued a Jew in saving her. She is thus initiated into the Hebrew faith. She astonishes all the Jews around her by prostrating herself and pronouncing the terms of her new faith thus consolidating her conversion.

Third Act: Nabucco is commanded by Zaccaria to destroy the false idol. Zaccaria and all the Jews are threatened with their lives. It is now Fenena's turn to defend the Jews who had spared her life by pleading clemency for them. In the process she declares herself a Hebrew.

Fourth Act: There is no role for the choir in this Act.

Fifth Act: A funereal march can be heard off stage. On stage, Zaccaria, together with Ismaele and Fenena

and the Hebrew throng are marched off to death. The High Priest helps Fenena, who prostrates herself on the temple's stairs and asks to be blessed by him. At that moment, Nabucco removes the chains from Zaccaria's wrists, tell him that all Jews are now free. All chains miraculously fall from the prisoners' hands. Nabucco then turns to the Babylonian crowd exhorting them to worship the one and true God of Israel who had given him back Fenena, his daughter. All kneel.

Solera uses all this material. The two episodes recounting the cursing of Ismaele and the High Priest's attempt to stop Nabucco from swearing are used by the librettist in the finales of Acts I and II respectively. From what remains he constructs large tableau pictures that are reminiscent of a Bach or a Handel oratorio. Such scenes are found in each Act. The first Act opens with the superb and magnificent chorus 'Gli arredi festivi' followed by the famous cavatina of Zaccaria. In the second Act, there is the High Priest's evocative prayer followed by the Levite chorus. This Act ends with a grand *mise-en-scène* which brings soloists and choral forces in a huge final ensemble. In the fourth Act there is the funereal march followed by Fenena's only aria in the opera and the last finale. In Act III, Cortesi does not come up with anything that could be suitably used in an opera, so Solera provides the material himself. Inspired by Psalm 137 *Super flumina babylonis*, which is precisely the lament of the Jews in exile, he writes the famous *Va, pensiero*, which is then followed by the prophecy. The latter appears to have been proposed by Verdi himself. So, one may rightly ask, where is the spirit of the *Risorgimento* in all this?

The religious aura implicit in Cortesi's scenes is not tempered or diluted by any words that Solera comes up with. In fact, Verdi, throughout his correspondence with Solera makes continuous reference to the Biblical tone of the text. The plaintive, religious tones of the choral singing in four of their major scenes portray far more profoundly the sense of an authentic religious experience than the ballet did. In their first scene, the choir does not simply ask for "divine help". In the triumphs of their arch-enemy Nabucco, they also recognise God's chastising methods, making them accept their guilt and asking for forgiveness while being contrite:

Ministro dell'ira del Nume sdegnato
Il rege d'Assiria su noi già piombò....

... Peccammo! ... ma in cielo le nostre preghiere
Ottengon pietade, perdono al fallir....

Spiritual and emotional disarray is the price the Hebrews pay in being defeated and exiled to Babylon.

In the second Act, the audience finds them fragmented. They mainly split up into two groups – those who remain loyal to their faith, as Zaccaria, and a much larger group that seeks to place the blame elsewhere but on itself. Solera pits together past and future in the additional scenes he inserts in the third Act. There is a strong desire for the recuperation of a lost Jerusalem which is mitigated with a newly-gained confidence in God's mercy and providential care. This confidence is largely inspired by Zaccaria's prophecy. Looking at the structure of the libretto in this manner, these added scenes make possible a seamless transition towards the invocations to martyrdom and the psalms of worship in Act IV. The intensity can be felt in the stresses, the deliberate choice of words that the librettist uses to heighten a given situation. For instance, in the first Act, the Hebrews, apart from sincerely invoking a religious interpretation of the crisis they find themselves in, also demonstrate an extraordinary ability to detest and abhor the 'strangers' and the 'barbarians' who are the sole reason for their plight:

... Di barbare schere l'atroce ululate
Nel santo delubro del Nume tuonò!...
... Non far che i tuoi figli divengano preda
D'un folle che sprezza l'eterno poter!
Non far che sul trono davidico sieda
Fra gl'idoli stolti l'assiro stranier!

Added to this, in spite of their invocation to prayer and contrition, when it really matters their God is expected to come up with solutions of a military nature:

Tu d'Abramo iddio possente,
 A pugnar con noi discendi;
 Ne tuoi servi un soffio accendi
 Che dia morte allo stranier.

In the final scenes of the first and second Acts, two big choral interjections are devoted to the curse on Ismaele. In their eyes, he committed high treason in saving Fenena:

Dalle genti sii reietto
 Dei fratelli traditore!
 Il tuo nome maledetto
 Fia l'obbrobrio d'ogni età!
 Oh, fuggito è il maledetto,
 Terra e cielo griderà.

Perhaps the most eloquent of all choruses is the added scene in the third Act, a hymn to the motherland if there ever was one, the famous '*Va, pensiero sull'ali dorate*', pregnant with a vision of liberty that signals the abolition of servitude and repression:

Oh, sorgete, angosciati fratelli,
 Sul mio labbro favella il Signor.
 Del future nel buio discerno ...
 Ecco rotta l'indegna catena!...

In the '*Va, pensiero*' chorus, the *Risorgimento* patriotic tone is implicit rather than explicit. The tone of the music's texture is introspective and nostalgic rather than bellicose and ardent. Perhaps it is also more profoundly effective because of this. Singing of the beauty of the land, on the disintegrating artefacts of past glory, stressing the suitability of these themes to the situation of contemporary Italy – all this was particularly clear.²⁸ The elegiac tones of this wonderful chorus could not have failed in passing the message to the audience, kindling the passions of numerous compatriots who may have felt insulted by the bellicose words '*Morte allo stranier*'. Despite the undoubted merits of the libretto, the opera became inextricably linked to the *Risorgimento* ideals mainly because of the grand and aristocratic tones of its musical language which admirably matched the Biblical epic tones of the prevailing themes, together with the patriotic and warlike touches that Solera imbued the libretto with. As evidenced in the correspondence, the contribution that Verdi made to the libretto is particularly important with regard to the militaristic scenes. The original libretto explicates that the main source of contention was between the belligerent Babylonians and the devout Hebrews. Nabucco invades and conquers Jerusalem using brutal force; however, at the end, through endurance, faith and supplication, the Hebrews emerge triumphant.

However, for Verdi, composing an opera replete with prayers may not have exactly inspired his audience. Pugnacious military tunes were more likely to do that job for him. Consciously or less so, he militarised the peace-inspiring Hebrews more than Solera's libretto did. The opportunities that came his way were exploited with panache and brilliance, commencing in the cabaletta '*Come notte a sol fulgente*' sung by the High Priest. On the words '*Ne' tuoi servi un soffio accendi / Che dia morte*' a full-bodied chorus joins in, producing a rousing and triumphant ending to this section. Yet, just before the words '*allo stranier*' the chorus stops singing, as if it does not want to be complicit in an impropriety. The word '*Straniero*' was used regularly for the occupying Austrians, thereby lending contemporary significance to a biblical term. Where the libretto did not offer opportunities for such innuendo, Verdi came up with them himself. This is most evident in the part where the Jews inflict a curse on Ismaele at the end of the first Act (example 1a: '*Dalle genti sii reietto*'), and the Levite chorus in the second Act (example 1B: '*Il maledetto non ha fratelli*'). These two episodes, which both involve anathema, Verdi composes with gusto and élan, changing the text into warlike marches which contrasts starkly with the sweet swinging march of the Babylonians.

Example 1(a)

Musical score for Example 1(a) in E major, 3/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The second system also has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The lyrics are: "Dal - le ge - ti sii re - jet - to, dei fra - tel - li tra - di - to - re!". The piano accompaniment consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The second system also has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The lyrics are: "dal - le ge - ti sii re - jet - to, dei fra - tel - li tra - di - to - re!". The piano accompaniment consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The second system also has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The lyrics are: "dal - le ge - ti sii re - jet - to, dei fra - tel - li tra - di - to - re!".

Example 1(b)

Musical score for Example 1(b) in E major, 3/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The second system also has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The lyrics are: "Il ma - le - det - to non ha fra - tel - li non v'ha mor - ta - le che a lu - i fa - vel - li!". The piano accompaniment consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The second system also has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The lyrics are: "Il ma - le - det - to non ha fra - tel - li non v'ha mor - ta - le che a lu - i fa - vel - li!". The piano accompaniment consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The second system also has a vocal staff and a piano staff. The lyrics are: "Il ma - le - det - to non ha fra - tel - li non v'ha mor - ta - le che a lu - i fa - vel - li!".

With brilliant foresight, Verdi realised that if he wishes to maintain this warlike characters of the Jews through the rest of the opera, he needed to offset the exclusive stress placed on introspective supplication and collective psalm singing in the final Acts. Thus, he ordered Solera to rewrite the third Act. This resulted in the Jews having a vision of a destroyed Babylon, thus enabling them to embark once more on another military march.

Given the dominance of military marches, it thus follows naturally that the orchestration for *Nabucco* is heavily reliant on the brass section, to the extent that there is also the presence of an off-stage band. This is not an isolated case in the Verdi canon; one finds the inclusion of a band in later operas, most notably *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Rigoletto*, and perhaps most notably in *Aida*. The use of the band in earlier Verdi operas served mostly to contribute to a scene of merry-making and revelry. Verdi's implementing the band contrasts heavily with Wagner's use of the same genre. Although composing at around the same time as his Italian counterpart, Wagner's scoring for the band seeks to evoke his Romantic vision of Germany's Teutonic heritage; it is an attempt to recapture a lost past, as it were. On the other hand, Verdi's ideas were very much rooted in his present time, and his vibrant and bellicose marches are perceived to be part and parcel of his ideals for the Italy of the 1840s.

The inclusion of popular band marches are reminiscent of a town-band in lively and noisy festivities, yet the sonority captured by these moments also seep through the strictly orchestrated movements too. As an example, one may wish to regard the choral episode '*È l'Assiria una regina*'. Although the orchestral accompaniment could well have sufficed with strumming chords played by the string section, these are compounded by adding bassoons, horns, and tuba, while the actual melodic line is augmented by the inclusion of trumpets and trombones in addition to the entire woodwind section. Time and again throughout the entire opera, the big choral ensembles are coloured by military sonority. I am here referring to, for instance, '*Noi già sparso abbiamo fama*', especially the ending on the words '*Lo vedeste?*' Even the poignantly evocative '*Va, Pensiero*' is robustly intensified at the end. Also, one cannot miss the rabble-rousing effects in the use of the brass section of the orchestra, probably through the association with popular band marches that audiences would have been accustomed to in the enactment of festivals, feasts, and other gatherings. It is no mere coincidence that Verdi uses the brass section mostly in the ensembles of the Hebrew priests, more specifically with Zaccaria, the high Priest. Historically, there was a continuous operatic legacy that made such use of the orchestra legitimate, without in any way demeaning or undercutting the ambivalence of its meaning.

Verdi seems to have had a particular interest in the trumpet for this opera, using it to announce '*D'Egitto là*', apart from having it strategically placed in the choral section on the words '*Come notte*', and again rising to prominence in the magnificent prophecy at the point where the High Priest sings '*del Leoni di Giuda il furor*'. What emerges from these reflections is the extraordinary difficulty there seems to be in disconnecting the religious from the militaristic motifs in the orchestration's distinctive colouring.

Verdi could hardly escape the patriotic flavour of Solera's text, and this prompts the composer to give what is arguably the most prominent role to the chorus in all his operas. In fact, this opera, together with the following one, namely, *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata*, earned Verdi the brand 'the father of choirs'. Although the undoubted genius of Verdi was evident to everyone, including the Milanese, yet, this people's awe for Verdi's choruses was based on entirely different premises. Verdi was astute enough to note that if his choruses were to represent a whole society, then the style of its pronouncement needs to be as popular as it could be. He achieves this aim by composing a largely number of his choruses in unison, rather than the accepted style of writing in 4-part harmony or more. Unison singing gives a collective thrust to the power of the music, and it can be more overwhelming than if the music were composed in intricate counterpoint.

Despite composers experimenting with contrapuntal structures in the choral settings, unison choruses were not without precedent by the time Verdi was writing *Nabucco*. However, until that time it had never before been exploited so dramatically and emotionally, with a clear purpose set as to its style and structure. In *Nabucco*, the intention seems to reflect the country's urge for national and collective solidarity. A few examples will suffice: the Levite chorus pour scorn and anathema on the alleged traitor, Ismaele, by singing in unison the pulsating and threatening words '*Il maledetto non ha fratelli*'; the chorus of Babylonians made

up of both male and female elements hail Abigaille, the regent, in unison on the words 'È l'Assiria una regina'. Perhaps most importantly, the exiled Hebrews sing in unison in the famous chorus of all, namely, the 'Va, pensiero sull'ali dorate'. Allegedly, when Rossini heard this chorus he proclaimed that it is an aria for chorus. By this is meant that 'Va, pensiero' democratised the aria, which, up till that moment, had been the exclusive prerogative of the protagonist.

These unison choral ensembles, which occupy large chunks of the opera's structure, are more often than not augmented by interjections mostly involving the High Priest, Zaccaria, giving added emotional weight to an already intense moment. Zaccaria is representative of the elite Hebrew, blessed (or otherwise) with more faith and vision than his compatriots. However, in the opera, he does not exist *apart from* but as *a part of* the rest of the society he represents. Therefore, his dramatic purpose can only be exercised when seen collectively with that of the chorus that accompanies almost all the time except in the scene of the *Preghiera*.

Therefore, there must have been something more than adding mere vocal force when Verdi places the chorus prominently in the more emotionally-loaded moments of Zaccaria's singing, namely, in the *Aria*, the *Cabaletta* which both occur in the first Act, and also in the scene of the famous Prophecy in the third Act. In these three instances, the chorus is not just a presence adorning the background of the stage, just adding more power to the mandatory *stretto* sections in transition between one mood and another or right at the end. It is actually involved in the solo aria that Zaccaria sings, identifying with his presence, his ideas, and his emotions. The aria 'DEgitto là sui lidi' is a good example to look at with regard to the liberty in managing the libretto which, tellingly, Verdi always asserted is the privilege of the composer to meddle with, as it were.

The librettist's words for this section is made up of two quatrains, with a rhyme-scheme following an ABABCD pattern. In setting these words to music, Verdi isolates the first two lines:

Freno al timor! V'affidi
D'Iddio l'eterna aita

in order to create a sort of leitmotif effect. To do this, he composes them as a loose *recitativo-cum-arioso*, declaimed with uncompromising rhetorical intensity. That said, on the other hand, one finds that the verses meant for the chorus and which occur right before the aria were ones that Solera hoped would be set to music and pronounced just once, ideally before the cadential resolution that leads to the aria proper and then not repeated. However, this is not what happens, for these lines keep occurring repeatedly in the later sections of Zaccaria's aria, most probably to demonstrate to what extent the chorus is stirred into patriotic fervour by the High Priest's singing. In fact, in this particular instance the chorus is so inextricably engaged in Zaccaria's solo aria that it manages to change this *Cantabile* into a two-stanza section. To extend this analysis slightly further, it is also interesting to note the feel of the second verse. The woodwind instruments play semiquaver patterns, thus conforming to traditional symbolism for utopian dreams, whether these be nostalgic or visionary. In *Nabucco*, the kind of figuration implemented by Verdi here is also used at the end of 'Anch'io dischiuso' and again in the coda to 'Va, pensiero', on the words 'O t'ispiri il Signore'. However, doubling the chorus with the brass section endows the moment with a distinctly assertive and resounding texture that is reminiscent of hymn or anthem singing, typical of collective prayer.

In placing precise stress on those moments in the libretto, Verdi popularises (in the best sense of that term) and militarises the words, without detracting from the authentically religious quality of that text. For instance, although the magnificent opening choral ensemble is, to a greater or smaller extent a lament for the loss of Jerusalem, it is additionally noted that the country's crisis should also be regarded as the consequence of transgression and, therefore, of a reaction by an angry God. The style and language used, therefore, are not those of a doleful and gloomy *cantilena*, but ones that project an instrumental evocation of anger and tempestuous moods, with cascading chromatic scales, quivering tremolos, and unannounced flashes on the upper reaches of the strings and flutes. That this notion is meant particularly as a musical metaphor for the avenging hand of God is further corroborated by a persistent accompanying figuration of 'Come notte', bringing this section to a definite close.

Example 2(a)

Example 2(b)

Allegro

Taken holistically, the religious metaphors and symbols with which the music of *Nabucco* is infused is as impressive as those associated with the *Risorgimento*. The potential for redemption over the dying Abigaille can be sensed in the shape of florid melismas on the solo flute²⁹ and should its significance be lost on the listeners, it is clearly articulated by the words '*Solleva Iddio l'afflitto*' sung by the chorus. One may remember similar figurations on the solo flute, again in the key of E Major, which accompany the ravishing supplication of the virgins in the first Act, although here instead of remaining at a static level they gently float up. The isolation of the High Priest in Israel's darkest moments, when his steadfast faith dazzles like the solitary beacon that lights up the stage, is expressed with clarity in '*Tu sul labbro dei veggenti*', an aria which is more akin to a religious hymn than a virtuosic utterance one invariably associates with opera. Initially, this is accompanied by a solo violoncello, adding further religious poignancy to an already devout moment.

Therefore, *Nabucco*, although it certainly relies on the sentiments and aspirations of its idiosyncratic quality for its dramatic excitement and dynamism, has an added quality to it which surely justifies its unique popularity in the Italy of the 1840s. The societies and beliefs which form the leading characters in the

opera, and which articulate their fate in the unfolding of an intense drama, are not thrown in an unclear or fragmented background. They are foregrounded and given a tangible, arresting quality through the librettist's eloquent phrases and, particularly, through the composer's memorable music. Although using a medium that had not been anticipated by Mazzini, *Nabucco* fulfilled the philosopher's desire for a kind of drama that built bridges between the natural and the supernatural, and which could endow human freedom with the consecration of God.

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- 1 Quoted by D. Kimbell in *Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 19.
 - 2 This notion is debated in some details by G. Procacci in *History of the Italian People*, trans. by A. Paul (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 272-81.
 - 3 Cited by C.P. Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957, repr. 2012), p. 201.
 - 4 These five powers were Austria, Britain, Russia, Prussia, and France.
 - 5 L.A. Garibaldi, *Lettere di Emanuele Muzio ad Antonio Barezzi* (Roma: Corradi, 1931), p. 259.
 - 6 A. Manzoni, *Sul Romanticismo*, trans. by J. Hilliers (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), p. 156.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, p. 209.
 - 8 *Op. cit.*, quoted by C.P. Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics*, p. 18.
 - 9 Quoted by A. Momigliano, cited and trans. by A. Colquhoun, *Manzoni and His Times* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 19.
 - 10 S.A. Nulli, *Shakespeare in Italia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1918, repr. 1996), p. 170. My translation.
 - 11 *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed., G. Cesari and A. Luzio (Milan: Mondadori, 1913), p. 450. My translation.
 - 12 Cited by A. Rutherford, *Byron, the Critical Heritage* (London: Continuum, 1970), pp. 334, 336.
 - 13 Francesco De Sanctis, *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* (Milano: Morano, 1870), p. 42. My translation.
 - 14 Alessandro Manzoni, 'Cinque Maggio', *Poesie* (Milan: Mondadori, 1968), p. 47.
 - 15 At best, this is a bizarre phenomenon when one remembers that imagination, fantasy and creativity are staple hallmarks of the Italian temperament.
 - 16 A couple of examples would be Rossetti's 'La Costituzione di Napoli', and Manzoni's 'Marzo 1821'.
 - 17 A. Momigliano, cited and trans. by A. Colquhoun, *Manzoni and His Times*, p. 213.
 - 18 Lady Blessington, *The Idler in Italy*, 3 vols., II (London 1839-40), entry for 3 May 1823.
 - 19 C. Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* (London: 1846 repr. Everyman Edition 1984), p. 51.
 - 20 *Ibid.*
 - 21 Antonio Ghislanzoni, quoted by Robert Hartford, *Italian Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 163.
 - 22 Stendhal, entry for 25 September 1816.
 - 23 D'Azeglio, p. 485.
 - 24 Cited by D. Kimbell in *Verdi in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 445.
 - 25 *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, p. 510. My translation.
 - 26 In fact, Verdi was to re-enact the triangular love dilemma in *Aida*, with Radames in love with Aida but having to contend with the desperate attempts on the part of Amneris to win him over.
 - 27 Verdi seems to be consciously or otherwise aware of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a character also paranoid for a very different reason but one who experiences a cathartic moment that endears him to the public by the end of the play. Incidentally, it is also a text Verdi had tried to set to music but gave up on.
 - 28 A similar chorus can be found in *Macbeth*. I am here referring to the '*Patria oppressa*' chorus.
 - 29 One cannot help remembering Gilda's last phrases before she dies in the arms of her father, Rigoletto. The orchestration there is dependent on rippling flourishes on the flute and upper strings for its effectiveness, in the same way as it does in *Nabucco*. There cannot be two more contrasting figures in Verdi's repertoire, namely, Gilda and Abigaille, but in the end, Verdi reconciles the differences through the enhancing of innocence in the former and salvation for the latter.