

NABUCCO – SYNOPSIS

Nabucco is an abbreviation of Nabucodonosor, or Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 BC), the king of Assyria who is remembered for the rebuilding of Babylon – and the creation of one of the wonders of the ancient world, its famous Hanging Gardens – as well as for the destruction of Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. Inspired by historical events recounted in the Bible and the philosophy espoused by the prophet Jeremiah, librettist Temistocle Solera based his text on them, including relevant Scriptural quotations to preface each act. The personal love story and surrounding intrigue are depicted by fictional characters, lending a human dimension to the larger geopolitical forces in play.

At the time of the opera's premiere, the whole of northern Italy was suffering under an increasingly unbearable Austrian domination. Insinuating that the plight of the Israelites under oppression by the Babylonians was comparable to that of the Milanese, Verdi amplified the call for Risorgimento, literally a "resurgence" of the people's will to achieve Italian unification. In the years following the opera's premiere, the contemporary relevance of the ancient themes of foreign oppression only intensified.

PART ONE

JERUSALEM

Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel; Go and speak to Zedekiah king of Judah, and tell him, Thus saith the Lord; Behold, I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

– [Jeremiah 34:2]

The Temple of Solomon – 587 BC Seeking refuge in the Temple of Solomon, the Israelites are mustering their strength to resist the fearsome Nabucco (Nebuchadnezzar), king of Assyria, who has attacked and is desecrating the city. Amidst the chaos, Zaccaria, the Israelites' spiritual leader, hurriedly seeks shelter from the warfare along with his sister, Anna. In an effort to negotiate an end to the siege, Zaccaria's forces have kidnapped Nabucco's younger daughter, Fenena, and now hold her hostage. He implores his people to be resolute ("Sperate, o figli") in their defiance of the occupying armies. Ismaele, nephew of the king of Jerusalem and an Israelite military leader, breathlessly recounts the horrors of the street combat that is swiftly approaching their stronghold in the Temple. Zaccaria believes his hostage will prove a powerful negotiation tool with his enemy; he hands custody of Fenena over to Ismaele, as the Hebrews bravely face the turmoil of the battle outside the sanctuary of the Temple walls.

It is soon evident that Ismaele and Fenena are not strangers but rather former lovers, having met while Ismaele was in Babylon on a failed diplomatic mission. Their romantic reunion is interrupted when Abigail, Fenena's older sister, infiltrates the temple. She scornfully turns on Ismaele as a warrior weakened by love. She then confesses her own love



him, and implies that she has the power to call a truce, if only he will return her affection (“Io t'amavo”). Unable to deny his devotion to Fenena, he offers to forfeit his life for his people. Hebrew refugees and wounded warriors are driven back into the Temple, fearing for their lives as the Assyrian forces overpower them. When Nabucco appears, taking possession of their most sacred stronghold, Zaccaria condemns his arrogance and threatens to slay Fenena, but Ismaele prevents her brutal execution. As the Jews turn on Ismaele for his treachery, Nabucco orders the temple sacked and burned, and declares to his troops that it shall be a crime to show any mercy to the Hebrews.

PART TWO
THE UNBELIEVER

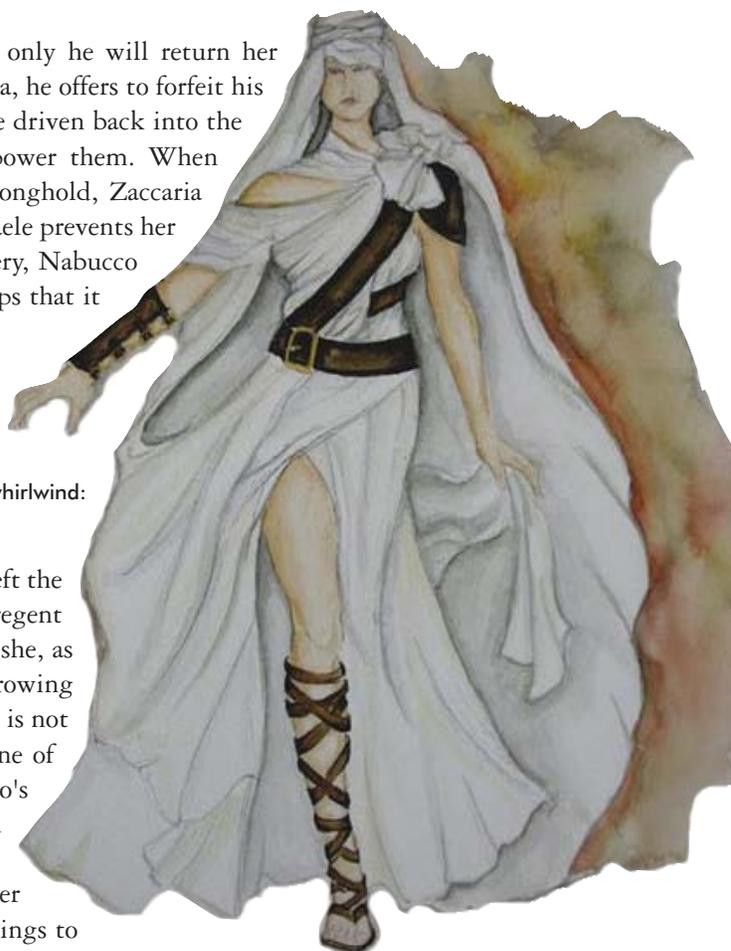
Behold, the whirlwind of the Lord goeth forth with fury, a continuing whirlwind: it shall fall with pain upon the head of the wicked. – [Jeremiah 30:23]

Several months later in Nabucco's palace in Babylon Nabucco has left the palace to wage another war, leaving Fenena in charge as regent queen in his absence, infuriating Abigaille who believes that she, as the elder daughter, should have that right. Confirming her growing suspicion, she has found an official document proving that she is not Nabucco's daughter but rather the child of slaves with no line of rightful succession to the throne. Angry and hurt at Nabucco's deception, she swears vengeance on him and Fenena, mindful that her devotion to Ismaele could have changed everything for the better (“Anch'io dischiuso”) had he only returned her affection. The corrupt High Priest of Baal interrupts her musings to announce that Fenena, in a gesture of humanity and good will, has liberated the captive Israelites. To punish what they regard as Fenena's treason, the priests have hastily arranged Abigaille's ascension to the throne, falsely announcing that Nabucco has been slain in battle. Abigaille feels she is vindicated and that fate has now restored to her the honor she deserves (“Salgo già del trono aurato”).

A gallery in Nabucco's Palace Zaccaria, aware of the menace and danger that his people are in, prays that his faith will give him the resolve to continue fighting (“Tu sul labbro”). He believes he may prevail in the conflict by converting Fenena, who has shown compassion for the Hebrews' plight. The Levites reproach Ismaele for his seeming treason, but Zaccaria reassures them that Ismaele has not betrayed them, since Fenena herself, in an act of conversion, has vowed to be faithful to the God of Israel. Abdallo, a Babylonian guard, rushes in with the false report of the king's death, warning Fenena that she is now in danger.

A Hall in the Palace The High Priest of Baal, followed by Abigaille and her supporters, enters to proclaim Abigaille ruler; her first act as queen shall be to condemn the Hebrews to death. When Abigaille demands the royal crown that Nabucco has entrusted to Fenena, the girl refuses to yield it. To the astonishment of all, Nabucco—very much alive, if mentally unstable—suddenly appears, seizes the crown and places it on his own head. Everyone cowers before the tyrant's rage (“S'appressan gl'istanti”), but sensing that his power is slipping away, he brazenly announces that he is not only their king, but their God as well. As he commands them to prostrate themselves before him, his insanity becomes apparent to all. Abigaille seizes the moment of personal and political turmoil to usurp the crown from the deranged king.

PART THREE





THE PROPHECY

Therefore the wild beasts of the desert with the wild beasts of the islands shall dwell there, and the owls shall dwell therein: and it shall be no more inhabited for ever; neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation.

– [Jeremiah 50:39]

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon Abigaille, in collusion with the religious leaders, exults in the praise of her subjects. In an effort to suppress any further insurrection, the High Priest of Baal exhorts her to put the Hebrews to death. Nabucco, having descended further into madness, arrives to see his throne now occupied by his illegitimate daughter. Taking advantage of his confusion, she persuades him to give his approval to the death decree against the Hebrews. He wavers, but her venomous taunts soon convince him. When he asks what has become of Fenena, Abigaille replies that she has converted to the Jewish faith and will therefore be executed with the others. Horrified by Abigaille's intentions, he searches for the parchment that would reveal that she has no right to the throne. She produces and then quickly destroys the evidence. He cries out for his guards to assist him, but they are no longer loyal to him. As he begs Abigaille to show clemency for Fenena, the guards, following Abigaille's orders, lead him off to prison.

The banks of the Euphrates River Taking a moment of respite from their forced labor along the banks of the river, the Hebrew exiles bid their plaintive thoughts to fly “on golden wings” toward their beloved homeland (“Va, pensiero”). Zaccaria urges them not to despair, but to use the power of their anger to break the chains of their captivity and to strike their oppressors in brutal retaliation.

PART FOUR

THE SHATTERED IDOL

Declare ye among the nations, and publish, and set up a standard; publish, and conceal not: say, Babylon is taken, Bel is confounded, Merodach is broken in pieces; her idols are confounded, her images are broken in pieces.

– [Jeremiah 50:2]

A prison cell Wracked with guilt and suffering from a worsening derangement, Nabucco is uncertain whether he is awake or trapped in a nightmare. He imagines Fenena being led away to the death to which he has doomed her. Losing the last shred of his faith, he prays the God of the Hebrews for forgiveness, pledging to convert his people (“Dio di Giuda!”). Attempting to intervene on his daughter's behalf, he realizes that he is indeed a prisoner and powerless to help her. Though believing that he has been rescued by Abdallo and that his army is once again loyal to him, he sees the death decree being carried out before him. He hears Zaccaria hail Fenena as a martyr to the cause of the Israelites as she resigns herself to death (“Oh, dischiuso è il firmamento”). The distraught Nabucco renounces Baal and, as a sign of his conversion, orders the god's idol to be destroyed. His senses failing him once again, he wonders if he sees Abigaille approaching. Having poisoned herself in horror at what her ambition has brought upon her kingdom, Abigaille confesses her crimes, hoping that it is not too late for Ismaele and Fenena to be reunited. Slipping in and out of consciousness, she prays to Jehovah for pardon (“Su me ... morente”) as the Hebrews reaffirm that their God will always raise up those who are afflicted.

– synopsis by Thaddeus Strassberger