

## NABUCCO – BACKGROUND NOTES

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The composition of *Nabucco* is a watershed event in the history of music, both for the career of Giuseppe Verdi and for the operatic genre itself. Though others had already shown some signs of reform, namely Gaetano Donizetti in his French operas, Saverio Mercadante in *Il giuramento* and Giovanni Pacini in *Saffo*, no one could match the power and verve Verdi put into his unbridled third score. It is no wonder the opera's energizing momentum would become a symbol for political upheaval as well.



Verdi's beginnings had hardly been auspicious. In spite of his studies with Ferdinando Provesi and his involvement in the local philharmonic society, the composer's application to the Milan Conservatory had been declined after he failed his piano entrance exam. He was resigned to study privately with a provincial teacher, Vincenzo Lavigna, and destined to become the *maestro di cappella* of the local cathedral. His first public performance at the Milanese Società Filarmonica, however, eventually led to an unofficial commission by its director, Pietro Massini, who proposed Temistocle Solera's libretto for *Oberto, conte di Bonifacio*.

By 1838, Verdi had returned to Milan score in hand, and determined to become a self-made man, began to shop his new opera around town. With him came his new wife, Margherita, and their young son Icilio Romano. It was a risky venture. Already 25 years old, the composer could have been considered past his prime when



compared to Mozart, Rossini and Donizetti. The Verdi family arrived amid the festivities of the visiting Emperor Ferdinand and Empress Maria Anna, for Lombardy was still part of the Austrian realm. At the same time, *Nabucodonosor*, a new ballet choreographed by Antonio Cortesi, was playing at the Teatro alla Scala. Times were hard – the couple was forced to borrow money from Margherita's father and she had to pawn her jewels – but Verdi was fortunate to have several people working on his behalf. Massini managed to get *Oberto* a booking at La Scala as part of a benefit for the Pio Istituto Filarmonico. Impresario Bartolomeo Merelli had an impressive roster of singers at his disposal – tenor Napoleone Moriani, baritone Giorgio Ronconi and soprano Giuseppina Strepponi, then believed to be at the height of her career. Several rehearsals were held, but the usual vicissitudes of theatrical life and philanthropy postponed the premiere until the following autumn.

*Oberto* was a *succès d'estime* at best, not generating negative comments nor receiving any great admiration. Though Strepponi hadn't sung in the belated production, she had seen



the score and had spoken kindly of it. Merelli thought Verdi's first effort worthy enough to offer a solid contract for three more operas composed at eight-month intervals. He also connected the young maestro to the House of Ricordi, which would publish his new work and maintain a life-long relationship through three generations.

Merelli offered several libretti to Verdi for a comic opera, and he chose the "least offensive," *Il finto Stanislao*, later to be named *Un giorno di regno*. Perhaps the first bad omen of many to come, the libretto had already been set by another composer and had failed miserably. As

the serious and sublime Romantic age began to blossom, comedy had become somewhat passé in Italy. *Don Pasquale*, composed three years later, is perhaps the only work to survive in repertory. Adding to the mix would be the great personal tragedy Verdi was to suffer – first his young son died, followed by Margherita. Composed under a dark cloud, Verdi's second opera was destined (in his eyes) for failure, complicated further by a lack-luster performance by its principal singers. Merelli pulled the opera after only one performance with the given excuse of an ailing soprano.

The events following *Un giorno* are somewhat shrouded in legend, obfuscated by Verdi's unreliable recollections set to ink many years after the fact. Even though the composer had supposedly given up on a career in music, Merelli held him to his contract and demanded another opera. At first, the composer considered *Il proscritto*, a libretto later set by Otto Nicolai (who had rejected *Nabucco*, a decision that virtually ruined his Italian career). It is said Merelli then forced Solera's new libretto upon him, and when Verdi returned home that evening, he angrily threw the book across the room, where it magically opened on the pages with the text to the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves, "Va, pensiero." He then slowly composed the opera piece by piece.

Merelli, however, was not quick to produce Verdi's latest opus. In 1841, he had already announced his Carnival season, which included two world premieres: Donizetti's *Maria Padilla* and Alessandro Nini's *Odalisa*, the local premiere of Pacini's *Saffo* as well as restagings of Bellini's *La straniera* and Donizetti's *Belisario*. After some persuasion, he agreed to tack *Nabucco* on at the very end, but with repurposed scenery and costumes (likely from the ballet of 1838). Ronconi and Strepponi were engaged as the two principal characters, Nabucco and Abigaille.

Verdi was probably thrilled with Ronconi, but perhaps not as much with Strepponi. Though she had risen to the pinnacle of operatic fame, she was showing signs of vocal distress. From the age of 19, she had embarked on an aggressive career, in part to assist her mother and fatherless siblings, and in response to demanding and amorous agents. The backstage theatrical *demimonde* was viewed with disdain by the average god-fearing citizen, as the irregular life of evening employment led to unconventional love affairs. It is said that most impresarios had their way with many of the prima donnas, and Strepponi was no exception. Her agent, Camillo Cirelli, a 64-year-old married man, fathered her first illegitimate child. A daughter (father undetermined) arrived a mere 13 months later. There is rumored to be a third, and certainly a fourth child was born in February 1842, right after a grueling performance of *Il giuramento*. The solutions for these unwanted pregnancies were few. Besides the stigma of being an unwed mother in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic Italy, Strepponi was in no position to care for a child, given her itinerant life and her family's dependence. She had to either find a family to care for them, or simply abandon the newborn in the Ospedale degli Innocenti. It doesn't appear she made any attempts at reunion later in life.



The stress of her pregnancies and her ambitious performance schedule took its toll on her voice and reputation. Once the shining star of bel canto opera, having excelled in the roles of Norma, Lucia, Lucrezia Borgia, Adina (*L'elisir d'amore*), Giovanna (*Anna Bolena*), Nina in *La pazzia per amore* (her signature mad scene a subject of portraiture) and *Adelia* (the score even dedicated to her), she had become the topic of derision by Donizetti by the time of *Nabucco's* premiere. As it turned out, Strepponi barely survived the highly demanding role of Abigaille, which she would have to sing eight times before the run thankfully ended. She was not re-

engaged for the fall revival, though she would sing in other Verdi operas until she finally retired in Paris. Nonetheless, she was immortalized in a painting with the score of *Nabucco* in her hands, and ironically, with camellias in her hair, the calling card of another Verdi heroine, the fallen *traviata*, Violetta. In spite of her shortcomings, she and Verdi would become friends, then lovers and finally spouses until her death in 1897.

The frenetic response to *Nabucco's* bombastic, unrelenting score over those eight nights (with the onset of Lent, the season was at its end) encouraged Merelli to remount the opera in the fall, when it would receive a record-breaking 57 performances. Verdi's star was on the rise, and the "boldly self-confident" composer would know a further triumph at La Scala with *I Lombardi* the following year. *Nabucco* would be staged in over 50 Italian opera houses within its first two years of existence. Verdi, the parvenu, was invited into the Italian intelligentsia and his fate was secured.

"Va, pensiero" became wildly popular among the people. Much has been made about the composer's role in the *Risorgimento*, or the movement to reunite Italy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout history, the concept of "Italy" had been more geographical than political as the last time the peninsula had been a unified country was during the Imperial Roman era. Since then, the region had been splintered by Dark Age barbarians, by Machiavellian princes of the Renaissance, and most recently, by the Austrian Hapsburgs to the north, and the Spanish Bourbons to the south, with Papal Rome in the midlands. During the Napoleonic invasions of 1798, the notion of a united Italy came back to the fore. The July Revolution of 1830 in Paris, abolishing the antiquated government of Charles X in favor of the more bourgeois Louis-Philippe, fostered the notion of rebellion, and ultimately futile uprisings occurred in Parma, Modena and the Papal States. By the 1840s, sedition was rife, a serious topic of conversation in secret societies, such as the Carbonari, and artistic salons, including that of Clara Maffei, a home frequented by Verdi. In 1848, another series of insurrections further destabilized Europe. Momentarily unsuccessful, they paved the way to partial unification in 1861. Venetia was gained in 1866, and another Napoleon led to total unity in 1870 when the French emperor pulled his troops out of Rome as he needed them to fight in the Franco-Prussian War.



Back in 1842, on the opening night of *Nabucco*, there were likely Austrian soldiers in the audience, a point clearly made in this production presented by Minnesota Opera. Did Verdi compose his early operas as political vehicles? There are two schools of thought. One commentator has noted that the chorus “Va, pensiero” most associated with the revolution



was not repeated as previously believed – such an outrage against the Austrian prohibition of encores certainly would have been reported in the papers. Perhaps Verdi became associated with the Risorgimento after the fact, his themes and choruses quite naturally reflecting public sentiment. Still, Solera was undoubtedly a librettist of the revolution, and Verdi appeared to have republican leanings – he even named his children after characters from the Vittorio Alfieri Roman-themed play *Virginia*. A precedent for public demonstration had already been set by Mercadante in *Caritea, regina di Spagna*, during which the chorus sings “Chi per la patria muor, vissuto è assai” (He who dies for his country has

lived enough). It has been noted that many Verdi operas of the 1840s contain numbers exactly for this purpose, and the composer wrote them as boldly as the censors would allow, hoping to provoke audience reaction. One can't deny *La battaglia di Legnano* was blatantly written to inflame the desire for unification (some have detected *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem, in its overture). It is certainly significant that Verdi turned to more introspective subjects after the failed insurgencies of 1848–49.

*Nabucco* (the shortened version of *Nabucodonosor*) is based on Nebuchadnezzar (c. 605–562 B.C.), the fearless Assyrian ruler and one of Israel's worst villains, and comes through history from the Old Testament's 2 Kings and book of Daniel. Aside from being a bloodthirsty tyrant, he was a voracious builder, said to be responsible for the Gate of Ishtar, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and along with his father, the ziggurat Etemenanki, a reconstruction of the Tower of Babel. He is also responsible for sacking and destroying the first Temple of Solomon. The Babylonian Captivity is an important chapter in Jewish history, accented poignantly by the famed operatic chorus already cited, itself based on Psalm 137: “By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept ...”.

Otherwise, the opera, the Bible and history part ways. The action of *Nabucco* is divided into tableaux rather than episodes, each with its own descriptive title. Solera aptly introduces each section with a biblical quotation from Jeremiah. However, as we progress into the third and fourth parts, his references become more creative as these passages are either wrongly attributed, or simply invented. Ultimately the plot was based on a four-act Parisian play by Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu in which, other than Nabuchodonosor, the characters and plot are entirely fictitious. In a complex drama worthy of Eugène Scribe, Abigail begins with good intentions – she rescues Phénenna from Israeli captivity and saves Ismael's life from the blade of an Assyrian soldier. She only turns evil when Nabuchodonosor shows preference for her younger sister, taking on a warrior princess



persona as she is betrayed from every direction. In the play, she is the daughter of *two* slaves, bearing no relation to Nabuchodonosor. When the king is struck by lightning for his blasphemy, she snatches the parchment bearing her secret as well as the crown. The subsequent madness, confrontation between foster-father and daughter, and the prayer restoring the king's sanity play out as in the opera, but Phénenna, having been executed, is restored to life by divine intervention, and Abigail, rather than dying of self-inflicted poison, is struck down by her surrogate father's sword in retaliation for her treachery.

The affection between Phénenna and Ismael is also more prominent, and the play has an ongoing conflict with their love and Abigail's jealousy as she determines to fight alternately for the crown and for Ismael's heart. In the opera, that focus is diminished as their original love duet in Part Two was cut by Verdi and turned into a prayer by Zaccaria. The duet of note is in Part Three concerning Abigaille and Nabucco, another unrestrained moment that speaks to the heart of the drama, the struggle between father and daughter for control and recognition.

Nabuchodonosor's dream and subsequent madness do find a corollary in the Bible. After interpreting the king's dream of a great tree cut down, Daniel relays: "He was driven out from men, he ate grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like [an] eagle's and his nails like birds," a metamorphosis of king into beast. It is wonderful justice for the arrogant tyrant, who built a colossal graven image and burned those who refused to worship it in a fiery furnace. Remarkably, religious persecution – then and now – has consistently been made by oppressive political and religious figures with false idols and invented scripture. Far from being picture perfect, *Nabucco's* story is a violent one, a geophysical force that resonates all the way from antiquity to revolution in Europe to the disquietude of the modern era.

