

WASHINGTON CONCERT OPERA

NABUCCO Program Notes

Saturday, March 4, 2023 | 6 PM | Lisner Auditorium

The March 9, 1842, premiere of Giuseppe Verdi's *Nabucco* at Milan's Teatro alla Scala proved to be a thunderbolt that transformed both its composer's professional trajectory and the history of opera. Instantly a tumultuous, popular success, *Nabucco* soon made the rounds of all significant Italian opera houses and became the first of Verdi's works to introduce him to an international audience through hastily arranged productions in Vienna (championed and conducted there by Verdi's fellow composer Gaetano Donizetti) and Lisbon. As audiences filled theaters to bask in this energetic new compositional voice, ringing with anthemic vigor, impresarios rushed to offer him new commissions. By 1853, only 11 years following *Nabucco's* opening, Verdi had churned out 16 more operas in what he deemed his "galley years." By the time this period of grueling activity drew to its close, Verdi had fulfilled his twin goals of achieving both pre-eminence in his chosen métier of opera composer and enough financial security to support himself and his beloved parents in their rural native town of Busseto to the north of Parma.

The phenomenal arc launched by *Nabucco* seems all the more surprising given the hardships that dogged Verdi in the two years preceding it. While the run of his first opera, *Oberto*, had enjoyed enough positive feedback at its 1839 La Scala unveiling to inspire the theater's impresario to entrust Verdi with a contract for three more operas, he found himself composing the first of them at the lowest ebb imaginable in his personal life. While trying to write *Un Giorno di Regno* (King for a Day), a comedy, he lost his beloved wife Margherita, then only 26, and their two infant children in rapid succession. Unsurprisingly, the opera flopped at its 1840 opening, and in despair, Verdi was ready to renounce composition forever.

What happened next to lure Verdi back to his Muse remains fodder for conjecture and debate. The composer himself spun the tale in his dotage, as if foreseeing a future cinematic biography, of having had La Scala manager Bartolomeo Merelli thrust Temistocle Solera's *Nabucco* libretto forcibly upon

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him against his will, and then having angrily hurled it onto a worktable upon his return home. The book then allegedly fell open “as if by magic” to the pages containing the words sung by the enslaved Hebrews on the banks of the Euphrates in the now-famous chorus, “Va, pensiero,” leading the composer to his keyboard “as if in a trance” to write the opera’s hit melody. Or, as Verdi wrote more prosaically in another context (chronicled by zoologist and Verdi confidant Michele Lessona), he may simply have spent months battling depression before, bit by bit, composing a few pages more of the opera each day until *Nabucco* was finished.

Separating Verdi’s self-mythologizing from truth has been the bane of his biographers, much of the embellishment usually having to do with the image he created of himself as an entirely self-taught musician and a scion of illiterate parents. It is true that he did not benefit from the same depth of training that a full conservatory education would have provided, but Verdi had been rigorously tutored in the rudiments of harmony and counterpoint, and he made it his business to immerse himself fully in the operatic and orchestral scores of his contemporaries and predecessors. Specifically, he made himself adept at learning the musical templates for individual and ensemble numbers created by Gioachino Rossini that had become the unofficial musical “language” of Italian opera in the first half of the 19th century, gradually lending them his own unique personal “voice.” Verdi was nonetheless spot-on in stating later that his early years were very much about “learning while doing,” and we as listeners can clearly hear him acquiring sophistication in all elements of his craft in the works directly following *Nabucco*. Yet the essence of Verdian style is already here: an unmistakable rhythmic vitality and alertness; an uncanny feel for musical and theatrical pacing; the wealth of his gift as a tunesmith; and his knack for bestowing both words and music on his choruses to make them equal to his leading principals as engines of storytelling.

Verdi introduces several of his patented archetypal characters with *Nabucco*, beginning with the title role, a forerunner of all his subsequent baritone protagonists who are either rulers of their people (Macbeth), fathers (Rigoletto,

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Germont in *La traviata*, Miller in *Luisa Miller*) or both (Jacopo Foscari in *I due Foscari*, Monfort in *Les vêpres Siciliennes*, Simon Boccanegra, Amonasro in *Aïda*). Verdi endows all these characters with the full range of human emotions and every imaginable vocal and expressive challenge to test a singing actor.

For her part, Abigaille is the first of Verdi's willful, ambitious, "tomorrow be damned" plum female roles, the antecedent to Lady Macbeth, Eboli in *Don Carlos* and Amneris in *Aïda*. While all are extremely difficult to sing, requiring the full gamut of technique and range, none is more punishing than Abigaille, whose vertiginous and almost relentlessly aggressive music makes the utmost demands upon any soprano brave enough to live in her skin.

A third Verdian "type" — the stalwart "man of God" embodied by a bass — arrives here as the character Zaccaria, presaging such other priests of sundry denominations as Padre Guardiano in *La forza del destino* and Ramfis in *Aïda*. Zaccaria's aria, "Tu sul labbro," with its delicate, intricate accompaniment by six solo cellos, hints at Verdi's full stylistic maturity. But it is the presence of the chorus, powerfully capping so many of the opera's scenes, that stamps *Nabucco* as a new and distinctly original work of art. No operatic chorus comes remotely close to the iconic status of "Va, pensiero," Verdi's melody for the oppressed Hebrew slaves pining for their homeland, as a timeless symbol of solidarity in national sorrow. Recent scholarship has disproven a legend dating from Verdi's lifetime that audiences routinely demanded encores of this chorus during the extended premiere run in 1842, defying an order by their occupying Austrian rulers that no encores be allowed, thus squelching even the vaguest hint of protest or rebellion. However, the chorus, with its earworm melody and sweeping "oompah" accompaniment, so aptly described by Rossini as "a grand aria sung in unison by sopranos, altos, tenors and basses," grew steadily in popularity as performances of the opera mushroomed throughout the Italian peninsula. Further, "Va, pensiero" was but the first in a steady stream of choruses penned by Verdi that could be easily interpreted by his compatriots to bolster national support for Italian reunification (the Risorgimento). His next

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two operas, *I Lombardi* (for La Scala in 1843) and *Ernani* (Venice's Teatro la Fenice, 1844) likewise featured patriotic rabble-rousing choruses. The result was a growing identification of both Verdi's music and the man himself with the Risorgimento movement, and the popular acronym "Viva VERDI!" became a coded means of also signaling solidarity with Italy's king ("Viva Vittorio Emmanuele Re D'Italia). Verdi both wholeheartedly championed the Risorgimento and selected the subjects he set as operas post-*Nabucco* with political consciousness as one of his criteria.

This determination to "shake things up" in writing for contemporary Italian audiences would often put him sharply at loggerheads with the ruling government's censors, who had strict codes prohibiting content with the slightest edginess or daring. Yet with *Nabucco*, Verdi as a neophyte unquestioningly accepted Temistocle Solera's libretto as offered to him, surely unaware that it would gain political momentum. Solera's book took its plot from a ballet by Antonio Cortese presented at La Scala in 1836, which in turn had been based on a play co-authored earlier that year by Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu.

In dramatizing the story of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605 — 562 BCE), both the playwrights and Solera drew from the biblical books of 2 Kings, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Daniel. As is so often the case with opera libretti, however, Solera's book plays fast and loose with both archeological records and the Bible, compressing Nebuchadnezzar's seven-year madness and relegating historical events to the background as a setting for a romantic triangle and political machinations. Censors in Italy saw nothing problematic in Solera's libretto to jeopardize the text being performed as written, nor did those in other European cities where productions of *Nabucco* proliferated. Only in London, where ordinances forbade depiction of biblical characters onstage, did Verdi's opera require a wholesale rewrite, presented under the title *Nino* at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1846. Verdi would encounter much greater censorship battles a few years later leading up to the openings of both his *Rigoletto* in 1851

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(for inclusion of a plotted regicide as originally written) and *La traviata* in 1853 (for daring to present a contemporary sex worker onstage as a protagonist). While history has ruled in each instance in favor of Verdi's judgment, *Nabucco* remains among the few of his successes that didn't result from a hard-fought battle for its very existence.

By the time of his passing in 1901, the tremendous success enjoyed by the *Rigoletto* and *La traviata*, along with *Il trovatore* (1852), eclipsed virtually all of Verdi's earlier operas that had initially met with success, including *Nabucco*. Those three works, along with *Aïda*, represented the composer's entire oeuvre almost exclusively at leading opera houses worldwide for the first quarter of the 20th century, when the other guaranteed big box office draws included operas by Puccini, Wagner, a handful of bel canto and verismo works, and French pieces by Bizet, Gounod, and Meyerbeer. A best-selling 1924 novel about Verdi by German author Franz Werfel (1890-1945), *Verdi, Roman der Oper* (*Verdi, A Novel of the Opera*) proved to be such a global success that it triggered a critical reevaluation of all Verdi's operas. The 1930s witnessed a gradual revival of Verdi scores neglected for decades in key German theaters, both witnessed and admired by fledgling impresario Rudolf Bing, a native Austrian raised in Berlin who became the Metropolitan Opera's general manager from 1950-1972. It was Bing who introduced *Nabucco* to New York audiences with a fully-staged production to open the 1960-1961 Met season, and who did much generally to return Verdi's operas to favor in the U.S. Yet as early as the 1930s, New York had seen major revivals of such long absent works as *Simon Boccanegra* and *Otello* due to the efforts of bankable stars who championed them, including American baritone Lawrence Tibbett and Italian tenor Giovanni Martinelli. Increasingly over the past 80 or more years, the works of Verdi have gained such a firm toehold on the international repertoire that a world without them front and center in our leading theaters seems all but unthinkable.

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The power of “Va, pensiero” to unite and console those gathered to grieve is Exhibit A of Verdi’s inimitable gifts as a communicator. Whatever the half-truths surrounding its use as an unofficial “protest song” of the Risorgimento, it is recorded fact that when Verdi’s casket moved through the streets of Milan on his funeral day, this chorus spontaneously arose among those who accompanied its passing, with perhaps as many as 100,000 lifting their voices together. When his body was moved to its final resting place at the Casa di Riposo, which he himself had established in Milan, Arturo Toscanini conducted 820 choristers in the melody again while close to 300,000 crowded in to pay their final respects. At once profoundly moving and immediately accessible, “Va, pensiero” epitomizes Albert Einstein’s statement that, “Everything should be as simple as possible, but not simpler.” Nearly 200 years after its birth, it stands as Verdi’s first enduring gift to the world and a testament to the healing powers of music.