

# VOX IMAGO

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NABUCCO

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## NABUCCO

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### NABUCCO BY VERDI: LISTENING GUIDE

Philip Gossett

Knowing what we do about the extraordinary artistic career of Giuseppe Verdi, it is difficult for us even to imagine the emotional state of the not-so-young composer in 1842. Verdi was twenty-nine years old, an age by which Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini had already established enormous reputations (Rossini had written *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at the age of twenty-four). Verdi came from a tiny village, Le Roncole, near a small town, Busseto, in the vicinity of Parma. His musical training was adequate, but hardly exceptional. A wealthy local patron, whose daughter he later married, helped him undertake further study in Milan, but he was already too old and not a good enough pianist to attend the Conservatory. Private lessons and regular attendance at Milanese theaters allowed him to develop his compositional skills and his knowledge of contemporary Italian opera, but the best he could reasonably have expected was a career as a local music-master in Busseto.

Force of will, as well as friendships with Milan's upper crust and the needs of the impresario Bartolomeo Merelli, brought him a first opportunity to compose a serious opera for the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, *Oberto*, in 1839, which had a discrete success. Meanwhile, between August 1838 and June 1840 his wife and both their infant children died, leaving Verdi in September 1840 to face alone the total failure of his second opera, a comedy, *Un giorno di regno*. He never forgave the Milanese public their reception of that work, as he wrote to his publisher Tito Ricordi in 1859, decrying a public that "maltreated the opera of a poor, ill young man, pressed by time, and with his heart torn by horrible misfortune ... Oh, if then the public had, not applauded, but borne in silence that opera, I would not have had words enough to thank them!"

Many legends surround the next year and a half of Verdi's life: his vows to abandon musical composition, the mysterious interactions between the composer and the impresario of La Scala, the growing affection and esteem between Verdi and the prima donna, Giuseppina Strepponi, who was to create the role of Abigaille in *Nabucco* and was to remain at the composer's side for more than fifty years. Then there is the libretto by Solera thrust into Verdi's overcoat, thrown carelessly on the kitchen table, springing open by chance to the words "Va pensiero sull'ale dorate." It is a period, in fact, for which we have almost no documentation, but this wealth of anecdotes fills the gap. The only certainty is that Verdi did indeed set to music Solera's *Nabucco*, which had its premiere at La Scala on March 9, 1842, marking the composer's coming of age, the first triumph of a life in the theater that would continue through the 1890s.

Solera was a fascinating character: an adventurer, who traveled all over Europe. A biography would be an amusing thing to write: Vienna, Hungary, Italy, and Spain (he was even an adviser to Queen Isabella of Spain). He was not only a librettist but also a composer, and had a big, bold imagination. Though not much interested or given to logical plots, nor to an examination of character, he tended toward the historical and scenic. In this he was not a little influenced by the traditions of French Grand Opera, especially as seen through the eyes of Rossini and his French operas.

*Nabucco* was based on a French play with the same name and also an Italian play, in turn based on the French. Let me briefly review the story. After a Sinfonia, based on motives from the opera that follows, we move to:

#### Part I: *Gerusalemme (Jerusalem)*

(N. 1. Introduzione). Hebrews, under attack from Nabucco and the Babylonians, are in prayer.

(N. 2. Recitativo [e] Cavatina Zaccaria). Their leader, the prophet Zaccaria, tells them to take hope: they have as a hostage Nabucco's younger daughter, Fenena, and he urges them to trust in God.

(N. 3. Recitativo [e] Terzettino). Ismaele, a Hebrew, and Fenena are in love, but Ismaele is also loved by Nabucco's older daughter, the warrior Abigaille. She arrives in disguise as a Hebrew with soldiers and interrupts the conversation of Ismaele and Fenena and the three sing a powerful trio.

(N. 4. Finale Parte Prima). When Nabucco and the Babylonians arrive, Zaccaria threatens to kill Fenena, but Ismaele frees her and Nabucco can let his soldiers destroy the Temple.

Part II: *L'empio (The blasphemer)*

(N. 5. Scena [e] Aria Abigaille). The scene shifts to Babylon. Abigaille, who has learned that she is not really Nabucco's daughter after all but the daughter of a slave, vows to rule Babylon. Nabucco, continuing his conquests, has left Fenena as regent, and she has promised freedom to the Hebrews. Furious, Abigaille calls on the soldiers to join with her by spreading the rumor that Nabucco has fallen in battle, after which she will proclaim herself Queen of Babylon.

(N. 6. Recitativo [e] Preghiera). Zaccaria and the Hebrews, now prisoners in Babylon, pray that God will grant them freedom.

(N. 7. Coro di Leviti). The male chorus turns on Ismaele and calls him "maledetto dal Signor" [accursed of the Lord]. When they learn that Fenena has converted to Judaism, however, they relent.

(N. 8. Finale Seconda Parte). Their joy is short-lived: the rumor of Nabucco's death is spread and Abigaille demands the crown for herself from Fenena. At that moment Nabucco returns and tells Abigaille that if she wants the crown she must take it from his head. But Nabucco goes too far: he orders the Babylonians and the Hebrews to worship him not as their king but as God. A thunderbolt strikes him and his mind wanders. Abigaille takes the moment to seize the crown and proclaim herself ruler of Babylon.

Part III: *La profezia (The prophecy)*

(N. 9. Introduzione). Abigaille is on the throne of Babylon.

(N. 10. Scena [e] Duetto [Abigaille e Nabucco]). She seeks to kill all the Hebrews, together with her sister, Fenena. Nabucco appears. She tricks him into sealing the death warrant. When he realizes what he has done, he tries to tell her of her lowly birth, but she destroys all evidence and orders Nabucco to prison.

(N. 11. Coro [e] Profezia). On the banks of the Euphrates the Hebrews are in chains. They sing the Coro "Va pensiero," as Zaccaria prophesies the destruction of Babylon.

Part IV: *L'idolo infranto (The shattered idol)*

(N. 12. Scena [e] Aria Nabucco). Nabucco, from his prison, sees Fenena in chains being brought to her death. His reason returns and he prays to Jehovah to help him. Troops faithful to him vow to destroy the traitors.

(N. 13. Finale Ultimo). The scene changes, and we see Fenena led to the sacrificial altar. Under Zaccaria's guidance, she prays to Jehovah. Suddenly Nabucco and his forces enter. He has overcome Abigaille's soldiers and leads everyone in prayer of thanksgiving to Jehovah. As he finishes, Abigaille enters: she has taken poison. As she dies, Zaccaria exalts Jehovah: in serving him, Nabucco will be the king of kings.

As difficult as it is to realize what *Nabucco* must have meant to Verdi the man in 1842, it is even more difficult for us to imagine what this opera meant and how it must have sounded to the Milanese public at that time. What political meaning did the opera seem to convey in 1842, for example? Contemporary reviews, stymied by press censorship, don't even mention the famous chorus of Hebrew slaves, the chorus that to us represents everything from the sublime (the formation of an Italian state, Verdi's funeral, and the opening of La Scala after World War II) to the ridiculous (commercials for air travel and spaghetti). Yet that choral melody, sung in unison, whose text paraphrases Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon," soon etched its way into the Italian spirit. And when the words invoke golden harps hanging silently on the willow, Verdi offers up these sublime harmonies. The tonality is F-sharp major—an unusual, interesting color—, and the orchestration is quite special—particularly the way he progressively adds winds to the principal phrase.

Did Milanese audiences in 1842 really understand the plight of the Hebrew slaves under Egyptian domination to be a metaphor for their own subjugation to the Austrian authorities? There is a fascinating change in Verdi's own, autograph manuscript of *Nabucco* that supports this hypothesis. It affects not "Va pensiero," but rather the final, unaccompanied ensemble for the victorious Hebrews, in which they praise "Immenso Jeovha" [Great Jehovah]. The piece begins with the text: "Immenso Jeovha / chi non ti sente? / chi non è polvere / innanzi a te?" [Great Jehovah, who does not feel you? Who is not dust before you?]. In its middle section, the text has always been sung as: "Tu spandi un'iride?... / Tutto è ridente. / Tu vibri il fulmine? / L'uom più non è." [You spread a rainbow?... Everything is joyous. You launch a thunderbolt? Man is no more.] Notice, in particular, the setting of "Tutto è ridente" [Everything is joyous]. Have you ever heard a worse agreement between text and music? That is about the most unjoyful phrase imaginable. During our work on the critical edition of *Nabucco*, edited by Roger Parker for The University of Chicago Press and Casa Ricordi, which will be used in these performances, we were able to unravel this particular mystery. Those were not the words Verdi originally set. His text read: "Spesso al tuo popolo / donasti il pianto; / ma i ceppi hai franto / se in te fidò." [Often your people turned to you in tears; but you broke the chains of those who had faith in you.] How much more appropriate these words are for the music, with "pianto" where the revised version has "ridente." These words are obliterated in Verdi's manuscript, with a violence that suggests more than a simple artistic decision. The vision of God breaking

the chains of a captive people was apparently more than the political traffic could bear: whether censored by the Austrians or omitted by Verdi and Solera themselves to avoid trouble, the text was modified.

It would have been wonderful had the critical edition been able simply to substitute the old set of words for the new, but it was not to be: while changing the text, Verdi introduced many musical improvements in the prayer. Today's performers therefore have three choices: restoring the right words in a poorer musical setting; accepting Verdi's compromise; or inventing a new solution.

Audiences in 1842 had no doubt whatsoever about Verdi's model for his presentation of the Hebrews in *Nabucco*, for the Biblical grandeur he seeks to invoke: as Pierluigi Petrobelli demonstrated long ago, Rossini's *Moïse*, written in 1827 for the Paris Opéra and recounting the story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt, was well known to them. *Nabucco* opens, for example, with contrasting choral passages: one in a minor key in which the Hebrews lament their fate; one in the parallel major in which they pray for God's protection. *Moïse* begins precisely the same way. When we think about how Verdi's early operas establish a new choral presence in Italian opera, we need to recognize that contemporary audiences knew very well the context from which that innovation emerged.

Nor is this the only such example. Verdi makes extensive use of the chorus, which is typical of both operas, especially of quick, rhythmically sharp figures, such as in the Finale Parte Prima and the Coro di Leviti in Part II.

"Va pensiero" is followed immediately by Zaccaria's prophecy, with the wonderful "gufo" [owl] brought out by instrumentation for low winds. Here Verdi invokes a different Rossini serious opera, *Le siège de Corinthe*. There are other rousing tunes for Zaccaria like this, usually with chorus. Notice the cabaletta at the end of N. 2. This was all part of the "Risorgimental" spirit for which the opera became known by 1848. But it was not only the political implications of the opera in 1842 that may have seemed very different. The music itself was heard in ways quite unlike what we can easily recapture. There was no *Ernani* against which to measure the patriotic choruses; there was no *Lady Macbeth* against which to understand the fierce Abigaille; there were none of the great Verdian father-daughter duets (*Amonasro* and *Aida*, *Rigoletto* and *Gilda*, *Germont* and *Violetta*) against which to hear the interaction of *Nabucco* and Abigaille. The context of *Nabucco* was not the operas Verdi was going to write in future years, but rather the *bel canto* style of Bellini and Donizetti, as well as the massive choral dramas of Rossini and the French Grand Opera tradition, as we have already seen.

There is no mistaking the *bel canto* quality of much solo vocal music in *Nabucco*, but Verdi's links to that tradition go further. By the end of the 1840s he had constructed the persona of an artist implacable in his demands that his music be performed exactly as he wrote it. But when La Scala informed him that, for a revival in the Autumn of 1842, the role of Fenena was to be sung by a soprano, rather than a mezzo-soprano, as at the premiere, Verdi himself altered the prayer Fenena sings as she is brought in to be executed. Verdi rearranged the material for his new singer, Amalia Zecchini. It is not just the higher register that is striking, but the ornamentation, which gives the music a notable *bel canto* quality. If Verdi in 1842 was prepared to ornament melodic lines in this way, should modern performers also be adding ornamentation? Actually, it's worse than that! When a different singer performed the role at La Fenice of Venice during the 1843 Carnival season, he wrote a largely different piece to the same text.

Although I have stressed the choral and ceremonial aspects of the opera thus far, *Nabucco* remains an opera of individuals, some more interesting than others.

Fenena and Ismaele are just not very interesting, even if they are crucial to the plot: obligatory love interest (the same is true in Rossini's *Moïse*). Zaccaria is more a symbol than a fully formed individual. Our attention is focused, finally, on the two characters that *do* command our attention: Abigaille and Nabucco.

Abigaille: she is a woman who has sacrificed her womanhood for power and glory (recall that she loved Ismaele). Verdi's treatment of her vocally is extraordinary. It is a very difficult role to sing, as can be seen through her entrance in Part I, when she breaks into the temple, anticipating Nabucco's arrival, and sees Ismaele and Fenena together. Even in the following trio, which is in a single movement, she is clearly set apart from the other two by her extreme range, leaps, chromaticism, and coloratura. Throughout the opera she is the only one to have this kind of vocal writing. Verdi clearly was taken by the character, as can be seen in Scena [e] Aria Abigaille N. 5 that opens Part II: the recitative is the most powerful among any of the early operas. While the aria is more conventional (a typical *cantabile* followed by a *cabaletta*), the melody is powerful indeed, especially near the end.

The opera ends with Abigaille's death scene and repentance, sung with a broken vocal line. Verdi would do something similar again in his *Macbeth* for the death scene of his hero. In *Nabucco* there is an accompanimental figure for a solo cello and solo contrabass, with harp, and with the melody played by the English horn. The broken melody begins in the minor, then, there is a big build up and a switch to the major for a soaring conclusion as she cries out to Jehovah and begs for forgiveness.

Abigaille is the first great Verdian role, extremely difficult to sing and project, but Verdi has given it a force of its own. Next Verdian heroine of this scope won't come until Lady Macbeth in 1847.

Nabucco: he is not quite as fully realized as Abigaille, but still has some superb things in the Finale Parte Prima, the big *cantabile* ensemble in the middle ("Tremin gl'insani"), after his entrance and the threat to Fenena's life. This is a wonderful example of Verdi's ability to weave voices together into a large ensemble: there is extraordinary variety in this section. It is typical that Verdi begins with a solo period (in this case, for Nabucco). As other voices enter they take different ideas. Most impressive is the middle of the ensemble, with Abigaille's big solo that throws real stress into the piece: harmonic and melodic. Then, the ensemble comes back to the tonic, with a very different, lyrical melody sung by everyone. Although it is related to the basic material of the ensemble, of course, everything is, it has a sound all its own. In the cadences, Abigaille again soars over the group.

Compare the Finale Seconda Parte, with the return of Nabucco and the "crown" exchange. There is a big, gorgeous Andantino ensemble ("S'appressan gl'istanti"), in the form of a canon, a splendid melody sung four times by the four soloists, beginning with Nabucco, then by the chorus. This ensemble is followed by Nabucco's declamation announcing himself as God. After the thunderbolt, Nabucco starts the final section: how does Verdi show his madness? By tearing the melodic and structural expectations apart. He starts as if it will be a typical quick cabaletta melody, but it falls apart as Nabucco lashes out against his invisible antagonist.

We cannot cancel more than a hundred and fifty years of history when we listen to *Nabucco* today. Yet it is important to imagine what the opera must have meant to Verdi and to those who heard it for the first time in 1842. Making that effort helps us perceive *Nabucco* not as a precursor of the glories that were to come, not as "early Verdi," in short, but as the remarkable statement of a maturing composer, with both strong links to the preceding generations and an ever-growing confidence in the power of his own artistic voice.