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VERDI'S *NABUCCO*:  
STUDY GUIDE  
FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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## STUDY GUIDE FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

### Introduction

This guide is designed for teachers of secondary schools (US middle and high schools) as an introductory study guide for *Nabucco*. It contains teaching suggestions for introducing young people to the operas of Verdi and, more generally, to the language of opera. Toward this second goal, and on the importance of giving students access to the heritage of four centuries of affective and cognitive values on the operatic stage, please see the study guides for *The Magic Flute* (2012) and 11 (2013) that appeared previously as part of the “Vox Imago” project.

This DVD and the accompanying volume that make up the “Vox Imago” project contain a rich array of materials to help teachers develop their lesson plans.

In order to understand just what an opera can communicate to us, we will consider the interaction between the different components that contribute to its overall meaning.

At a basic level there is the literary text, prepared by the librettist. This consists of dialogue and stage directions. The story and the characters can be read, and therefore interpreted, in very different ways. If the libretto were simply acted, as if intended for the spoken theater, we would have as many different interpretations (for example, dramatic, poignant, ironic, or detached, etc.) as there are directors who mount a production and the company of actors that plays it.

In opera we also have directors and actors (in this case, singers). But in opera, between that first step—the libretto—and the last—the theatrical production—a spe-

cial kind of interpreter steps in: the musician. The composer sets the story and the words to music, transforming the speech into singing and adding an instrumental narrative. In doing so, he offers his reading, his interpretation of the literary text. It is this level, this component of the production, that becomes the primary semantic universe of the opera house, and the one on which we should therefore focus our students' attention.

These reflections could be food for thought in class:

Music is the best consolation precisely because it does not create new words. Even when it accompanies words, its magic prevails and eliminates the danger of words. We believe in it without reservation, for what it expresses is about emotions. Its flow is freer than anything else that seems humanly possible, and this liberty redeems. The more densely the earth is populated and the more mechanical our way of life becomes, the more indispensable music becomes. There will come a day when it alone will permit us to flee the snares of functions, and to keep it a powerful and intact reservoir of liberty should be the most important task of intellectual life in the future. Music is the true living history of humankind, which otherwise possesses only dead members. There is no need to tap into it, since it already exists within us.<sup>1</sup>

Adorno, building upon a remark by Hofmannsthal but writing specifically about *Wozzeck*, describes opera as “an interlinear version of its libretto,” that is, a musical commentary on what goes on between the interstices of dialogue, on

what the actual text itself has not in it itself realized. To put it another way, the composer fills in what stage directors call the “subtext” of a play.<sup>2</sup>

### The Plot

Librettist Temistocle Solera’s plot is pure fantasy, but it allows us to touch on some basic historical themes with the students, either directly with the Jewish diaspora, or indirectly with the Italian Risorgimento.<sup>3</sup> Do a quick overview.

Part I: The Hebrews have been defeated in battle by the Assyrians, led by Nabucco (Nebuchadnezzar). But the High Priest of the Hebrews, Zaccaria, comforts his people with the knowledge that a valuable hostage has fallen into their hands: Fenena, the daughter of their enemy, Nabucco. The Hebrew prince Ismaele is in love with her. The two are about to elope, when an enemy force breaks in, led by Abigaille, another supposed daughter of Nabucco. She is also in love with Ismaele, who doesn’t return her affection. When Zaccaria raises his dagger against the hostage Fenena, Ismaele stops him. Having liberated Fenena, Nabucco orders the sack of Jerusalem. The Hebrews curse Ismaele, branding him a traitor.

Part II: The scene changes to Babylon, where the Hebrews have been sent into bondage. Here Abigaille learns that she is not the natural daughter of Nabucco but only a slave, whom the king had adopted. For this reason, the heir to the throne is Fenena, not her. This gives Abigaille two reasons to hate: Nabucco for preferring Fenena, and Fenena as her rival for Ismaele’s love. Abigaille has had enough when she learns from the Assyrian High

Priest that Fenena has freed the Hebrews. The throne cannot go to Fenena. The High Priest has spread the rumor that Nabucco is dead and proclaims Abigaille queen. However, Nabucco is alive and furiously bursts onto the scene. He goes so far as to curse the Babylonian god who led them to treason. There are no other gods, neither Hebrew nor Assyrian. The only god that they all must worship now is him, Nabucco. Lightning strikes from the sky, stunning the king and blasting the crown from his head. Immediately Abigaille picks it up and proclaims herself queen.

Part III: Nabucco is still stunned and insane. Abigaille asks him to sign the decree that condemns all Hebrews to death, among them the despised traitor Fenena. No longer shall Fenena, but Abigaille be queen. Nabucco is shocked: Fenena will be queen—Abigaille is only a slave! But in the previous scene, Abigaille had found the paper that declared her true identity, and now she destroys it in front of Nabucco.

Part IV: Now the fate of Fenena and the Hebrew prisoners is sealed. It is here that they raise to heaven their longing for their lost homeland in the famous chorus, “Va pensiero.” Nabucco, who is also imprisoned, is watching his daughter Fenena walking to her execution when he hears the cry of his warriors who have remained loyal. He is released, knocking down the Babylonian idol and freeing the Hebrews as well. The king and Abigaille both convert to Judaism. Now Abigaille sees no other choice but to poison herself; she dies after asking Fenena for forgiveness.

### The Historical Backdrop: the Diaspora

The plot of the opera lets us study not only the historical conflict between the Assyrians and the Hebrews, but more generally the phenomenon of the Jewish diaspora, which as we know has lasted for millennia.

Since the eighteenth century BCE, the presence of a Jewish community in Palestine has been established, with further settlements in neighboring areas, such as Egypt. A warlike people, like the others with whom they contended for territory: the Philistines, Hyksos, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Assyro-Babylonians, Sumerians, and Persians. According to the Bible, the greatest testimony of this people—partly historical, partly mythological—the Hebrews did not hesitate to slaughter their enemies, as in warfare of every era. Similarly, the history of this people is also marked by violent internal conflicts among the various tribes and religions, for which the myth of Cain and Abel is an archetypal symbol.

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, ended a series of wars by destroying the temple in Jerusalem and deporting the city’s inhabitants to Babylon in 587 BCE. This character and the deportation of the Hebrews are the only elements that Solera’s libretto draws from history. He also incorporated a quotation from Psalm 137, “By the rivers of Babylon” in the King James version, in his “Va pensiero,” as we shall see. The temple would be rebuilt 70 years later.

Formerly a country under Rome’s protection, Palestine definitively became part of the Roman Empire in 70 CE. Destroyed

forever was the temple of Jerusalem, and its population suppressed or enslaved. A last revolt during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (in 135 CE) brought an end to a Jewish homeland in Palestine and gave rise to the diaspora (dispersion).

What firmly united the Jewish people was their strong reliance on a religious conviction hitherto almost unheard of, which gave rise to the feeling of a “chosen people”: monotheism. With its corollary religious, dietary, and social practices (the Sabbath day of rest, circumcision, marriage only within the faith, etc.) the people marked its “difference.” This may explain why, until now, the Jews have avoided assimilating with the peoples among whom they lived. The rejection of and closed-mindedness towards other religions, however, chafed against the polytheistic permissiveness of Greco-Roman civilization, which reacted by destroying the monuments of Judaism and condemning its practices.

Christianity began as a new variant of monotheism. To defend themselves from persecution, Christians insisted on their distinction from Judaism (hence the abolition of circumcision and Jewish dietary laws) and largely remained uninvolved in the Jewish revolution against the Roman empire. Although in the third decade of the first century CE judicial power was in the hands of Roman officials like Pontius Pilate, Christians blamed the Jews for Jesus’s crucifixion. From here it is only a short step to the epithet “Christ killers.”

Ever since Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in 380, the fate of Judaism has been uncertain. At

various times in the different countries which accepted the Jews, they have been persecuted by the cruel limitation of their rights, with appropriation or destruction of their property, expulsion, and even extermination. In 1492, with the victory of Isabella of Castile and Alfonso of Aragon against the Moors, all Jews were expelled from Spanish territory. In the sixteenth century ghettos were established where the Jews were required to live. During the next two centuries there were more massacres in Poland and Ukraine, and in the nineteenth century pogroms proliferated in Russia.

This is intended to remind our students that the persecution of the Jews was not a practice introduced by the Nazis, but a long series of tragedies stretching back more than 1500 years. Even the yellow star mandated by the Nazis to mark the Jews as part of the “final solution” was not their invention. It was first introduced in 1215 by decree of the Lateran Council, an ecclesiastical synod of the Catholic Church in Rome. To close out these painful events, it is worthwhile to remember that the advent of Islam meant that Jews could find safe haven in Islamic countries from persecution by Christians. This is what happened in Spain in 711 after the battle that brought Andalusia under Arab rule. Consequently after 1453, when Byzantium fell to the Muslims (therefore ending the Eastern Roman Empire), many Jews began emigrating to Turkey.

More generally, the diaspora presents classroom topics that encourage the rejection of any oppression of one people over another and to establish the right of

a people to be what it is, with its beliefs, customs, habits, language, religion, and all the other expressions of culture.

### Verdi and the Risorgimento

In some ways, *Nabucco* is the prototypical work of the Italian Risorgimento. Indeed, the only widespread form in Italian theater of that period was opera, and it was a popular theater. The masses saw and heard the operas of Bellini, Donizetti, Mercadante, Pacini, and Rossini, as well as Verdi's early works, beginning with *Nabucco*, which was a resounding success at its premiere. Even if they didn't hear them in the theater, people recognized these operas from the accordionists who circulated the streets, playing the principal melodies.

Italy was then on the eve of the Risorgimento: a ferment of movements, failed insurrections, diplomatic machinations, and deep-rooted ideological conflicts, such as between the positions of radical republican Giuseppe Mazzini and the “non-revolutionary progressive” Count Cavour, to say nothing of Giuseppe Garibaldi, who led an attack on the Vatican States headed by Pope Pius IX. The young people of the middle classes, aware of the experience of the French Revolution, felt the allure of the claims of liberty, independence, and unity.

The composers joined fervently in this atmosphere, and even if they held back from a personal political commitment, they gave voice to its ideals in their operas. Today, Verdi would be called a “committed” composer. In 1859 he went so far as to buy rifles for the National Guard of

his hometown, Busseto, when the Duchy of Parma, to which it belonged, was about to proclaim its annexation to Piedmont. He was a fervent admirer of Cavour, whom he went to visit immediately after the unfortunate Treaty of Villafranca; that treaty led the outraged statesman to resign in protest against Napoleon's betrayal of his allies. In 1861 Verdi would be a member of the first Italian Parliament, and how bitterly he regretted being unable to take arms in battle! There is a letter in this regard addressed to Countess Maffei on 23 June 1859, the day before the battle of Solferino, in which the allied armies of France and the Sardinian army won a costly victory over the Austrians:

Montanelli...a simple soldier in the volunteers. The old professor of civil law who sets such a noble example! This is beautiful, it is sublime! I can only admire and envy him! Oh, if my health were better, I would be with him too! What I tell you is best kept secret: I wouldn't say it to others, so you wouldn't think it vain boasting. But what could I do, not being able to do a three-mile march, with a head that can't hold up to five minutes of sunshine, and a little wind or damp gives me a sore throat and sometimes lands me in bed for weeks? Lousy constitution of mine! Good for nothing!

But Verdi was not a “good for nothing.” His commitment expressed itself through his orchestra and singers, with much greater conviction and energy than his predecessors. Verdi, who began writing music after the other famous composers had stopped (Bellini, Rossini) or were about to

stop (Donizetti), explicitly demonstrated his patriotic passion in his operas for all the world to see. Listening to these fiery pieces, the students could easily imagine how ardently the Florentine audiences embraced the unbridled anthem “La patria tradita” [The betrayed homeland] from *Macbeth* (1847), which was written a few months before Novaro set Mamei's “Fratelli d'Italia,” which eventually became the Italian national anthem; or how enthusiastically patriots substituted, in the chorus “Si ridesti il leon di Castiglia” [Let the Lion of Castile rise again] from *Ernani* (1844) the name of Savoy, Victor Emmanuel II's royal house. Verdi's operas are a treasure trove of stirring numbers: from “Cara patria” [Dear homeland] and “È gettata la mia sorte” [My fate is sealed] from *Attila* (1846) to “Viva Italia” [Long live Italy], which opens *La battaglia di Legnano* (1849), and, of course, “Va pensiero” from *Nabucco* (1842). Giuseppe Giusti wrote about “O Signore dal tetto natio” [O Lord of our birthplace] from *I lombardi alla prima crociata* (1843), which he heard sung in the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan by the occupying Austrian soldiers, remarking that its poetic effect, “moved and intoxicated so many hearts.”

The importance of opera in the history of nineteenth-century Italy is explained by musicologist Herbert Lindenberger:

Just as a revolutionary spirit that inflames a particular historical moment may leave its mark on operas in its time, so operas may leave their own marks on the spirit of later times and, in some instances, help shape them...Both in its

institutional life and in its actual content, opera gives voice to the historical forces in which it is caught up; as an affective form it seeks to express history with an immediacy unattainable among the more rational forms of expression, on some occasions even to influence history through its ability to convert its hearers to the ideals it expresses.<sup>4</sup>

### The Unknown God

In a musical recapitulation of the Risorgimento, we must not omit the voice of Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), the Genoese republican and patriot who founded Giovine Italia [Young Italy] and was a leader of the Risorgimento. A passionate music lover and talented amateur guitarist, he was disturbed by the decline evidently taking place in opera houses, which he wrote about in an essay with the ambitious title, *Philosophy of Music*.<sup>5</sup> In his essay he calls on those who “understand the immense influence that art could exercise on societies if pedantry and venality had not reduced it to a servile mechanism.” Today, he continues, “the inspiration that gave life to art is now dried up. Nothing new has appeared...Music, the only language common to all nations, unique in conveying an explicit insight into humanity, is certainly called to a higher destiny than to help a few idlers pleasantly fill their leisure time... It has revealed its power to individuals and multitudes whenever people used as an inspiration to bold deeds...the purest, most universal, and most sympathetic expression of a social faith. An anthem of just a few bars has led us to victory in the recent past...” Further on, speaking of the function of the chorus: “...why could not the chorus,

a collective individuality, take on its own independent, spontaneous life, like the people they are supposed to represent? Why, in relation to the protagonist or protagonists, would it not constitute that element of conflict that is essential to every dramatic work?” As for giving voice to the individual characters, he advocates for a music “that can bring out the most subtle impulses of our hearts and reveal their secrets.”

Mazzini wrote these words in 1835, seven years before *Nabucco*, when the young Verdi had just begun to sketch out his first composition exercises. At the beginning of his essay, Mazzini addressed his study “to the unknown young man, who in some corner of our country, as I write, is feeling that first inspiration, and conceals within himself the secret of a musical epoch.” And at the end of the essay, he dedicates it to the *Ignoto Numini*, “the unknown god,” meaning “that genius who will arise. The time is ripe and so are the believers who will worship his creations: he will arise without fail.” Mazzini imagined it would have been Donizetti who would accept this high calling. Instead it would be Giuseppe Verdi, who without having read his prophet’s words, came to incarnate his ideals. Mazzini’s words seem accurately to foretell the composer’s assault on the operatic scene—because it really was an assault, as his audience immediately realized, from 1842 onwards. *Nabucco* marks the advent of a new expressive world on the operatic stage: Mazzini’s anticipated heroic world, which continued after *Nabucco* with the choruses and rhythmic drive of *I lombardi alla prima crociata*, *Attila*, and *La battaglia di*

*Legnano*. The impetuous rhythms of many numbers from *Nabucco*, beginning with the chorus “Come notte a sol fulgente,” reveal an energy that patriots would soon link with their revolutionary aims, and would be made to serve them. The galvanic charge of this score is also furthered by the orchestral music, with its prevalence of brass (trumpets, trombones, horns) and frequent march rhythms.

### Choruses and Rhythms

The chorus mentioned by Mazzini occupies a crucial position in the opera because it gives voice to the people as a whole. Draw the students’ attention to this point. The chorus is an important prerogative of musical theater, an expressive potential

denied to spoken theater, in which a crowd cannot speak as one without some sort of artifice like the spoken chorus of Greek tragedy or various works of the twentieth century. When compared to the “naturalness” of dialogue, the chorus in spoken theater can only seem an exaggeration, or more properly, if we feel an obligation to recite the words in unison, a small “loan” from musical language.

In *Nabucco* the chorus assumes the role of a true protagonist: it is the people, whether the Hebrews in “Va pensiero” or the Assyrians in “È l’Assiria una regina.” Sometimes it interacts with the characters in short passages, but above all, for entire long numbers. We will consider the latter in terms of the rhythmic structure of each of them.

Part I

1. “Gli arredi festivi giù cadano infranti” [Pull down and destroy the festive decorations]

Rhythm A

#### Allegro mosso



This is the chorus that opens the drama, with a long, three-part section. First, the whole Hebrew populace prepares anxiously for the Assyrian invasion with a tempestuous chorus marked by a frenetic accompaniment dominated by the wind instruments. The Levites (priests of the religion) reply:

2. “I candidi veli, fanciulle squarciate” [Your white veils, maidens—rend them]

Rhythm B

#### Poco meno mosso



The brass accompany in the form of a solemn hymn.

3. "Gran nume che voli sull'ale dei venti" [Almighty God, who fliest on the wings of the winds]

*Rhythm C*

**Poco meno mosso**



This is the final section of the choral opening scene: the song of the women who trust in God, to the accompaniment of harp and woodwinds.

4. "D'Egitto là sui lidi" [On Egypt's shores]

*Rhythm D*

**Andante maestoso**



Zaccaria, the High Priest, has calmed his people: perhaps there is hope for salvation in holding Fenena hostage. It is a foursquare and solemn motive, almost Beethovenian. The binary subdivision of the melody is enlivened by triplets in the accompaniment.

5. "Come notte a sol fuggente" [As night before the blazing sun]

*Rhythm E*

**Allegro**



The people echo Zaccaria's reassurances, repeating his invective. It is an unusual case of a brief polyphonic insertion into the chorale texture.

6. "Lo vedeste? Fulminando egli irrompe" [Did you see him? Thundering he plunges into the fray]

*Rhythm F*

**Allegro agitatissimo**



But now the people are terrorized by the eruption of Nabucco and his troops onto the scene. The rhythm is strongly marked, hammering.

7. "Tu che a tuo senno de' regi il core" [Thou, who in thine wisdom can change the heart of kings]

*Rhythm G*

**Andante**



From here until the end of the scene, the chorus underpins the soloists, reinforcing their prayer for help from God.

8. "Dalle genti sii reietto" [May you be rejected by the people]

*Rhythm H*

**Presto**



Ismaele is cast out by his people for having freed the hostage Fenena. The staccato syllables, interrupted by rests, are the conventional way of expressing such an explosion of anger during this period. The original is in duple meter (cut time). Here we transcribe it with smaller note values in order to emphasize the contrast with the other rhythms.

Part II

9. "Noi già sparso abbiamo fama" [We have already spread the rumor]

*Rhythm I*

**Allegro mosso**



Here the chorus gives voice to the Assyrians, who openly and boldly renounce Nabucco and offer the crown to Abigaille.

10. "Il maledetto non ha fratelli" [The accursed have no brothers]

*Rhythm L*

**Presto**

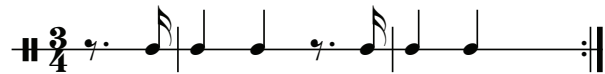


The Hebrews curse Ismaele. The movement now becomes inexorable, presto.

11. "S'appressan gl'istanti d'un'ira fatale" [The time draws near for his fatal wrath]

*Rhythm M*

**Andantino**



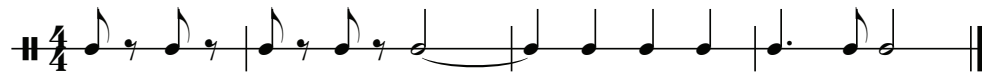
And again the Hebrews prepare for the worst: the chorus, representing the people, joins the soloists, who are singing in unison.

Part III

12. "È l'Assiria una regina" [Assyria is a queen]

*Rhythm N*

**Tempo di marcia**

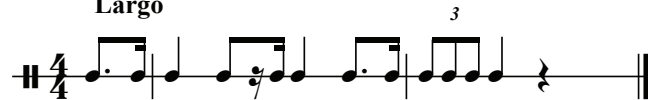


The Assyrians celebrate their homeland. The music has a carefree character and echoes the expressive color of the chorus, Ex. 9. It befits the Assyrian victors to have a melodic and rhythmic identity that is clearly different from that of the enemy Hebrews.

13. "Va pensiero" [Fly, thoughts, on golden wings]

*Rhythm O*

**Largo**



The voice of the Hebrew people finds its perfect expression in the famous song of regret and nostalgia for their lost homeland.

14. "Oh qual foco nel veglio balena" [Oh, what fire burns in the old man!]

*Rhythm P*

**Andante mosso**



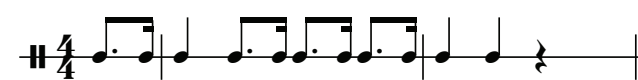
The Hebrews take heart and prepare for revolution. It is worthwhile to point out an operatic convention to the students: the temporal compression of the events on the stage. The composer is not concerned with making the time needed for the action of the plot coincide with the time of the music; this is a kind of musical moment that transcends time at a turning point in the story. This is even more evident in eighteenth-century opera, with its typical suspension of time during an aria, which interrupts the flow of the events. The students won't have trouble accepting this convention if they realize that this same kind of time compression is often encountered in films, not just in opera.

Part IV

15. "Oh noi tutti qui siamo in tua difesa... Cadranno i perfidy" [Oh, we have come to your defense! The traitors will fall]

*Rhythm Q*

**Allegro**



The Hebrew soldiers prepare to fight alongside Nabucco, who has converted to Judaism.

16. "Immenso Jeovha" [Mighty Jehovah]

*Rhythm Q*

**Adagio**



The triumphal prayer of the Hebrews, who are liberated at last.

Listen to these choruses. We should immediately see that Verdi has made a few basic choices. The first is that all are in 4/4 (quaternary) time—with three exceptions. Quaternary time is typically used for solemn marches (such as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," "Pomp and Circumstance" or the national anthems of France and Italy: the "Marseillaise" and "Fratelli d'Italia" respectively.) In this way, Verdi underlines the "biblical" gravity of the people. He makes an exception with the 2/4 (binary) meter in the chorus Ex. 8, in which the binary rhythm urges on the forceful condemnation of the Hebrews in banning Ismaele. There are also two choruses in 3/4 (ternary) meter: the waltz meter is meant to communicate a basically different expressive atmosphere. Verdi uses

in the chorus Ex. 7, in which the prayer of the Hebrews is the same rhythm as the arrogant Nabucco's "Tremin gl'insani del mio furore" [These madmen should tremble before my fury], where the ternary meter amplifies his fury. Verdi also uses it in Ex. 11, where it underlines the feeling of uncertainty and stasis of the entire scene.

### Rhythmic Games

There is a second option for teaching these rhythmic patterns. Eleven out of the sixteen choruses begin with an anacrusis (pickup note or upbeat: da-DA). The anacrusis immediately communicates the idea of surging forward. This phenomenon is also repeated with even greater frequency at the lower level of the individual rhythmic unit, where dotted rhythms predominate. These fundamental rhythmic choices give the entire opera a patina of epic impetuosity that listeners can feel, even without knowing what the rhythmic cause is. These were the rhythms that set fire to the tinderbox of liberty and rebellion in the hearts of the patriots of the Risorgimento.

We can use these for various activities with the students. For example:

1. Have them recite the words in the rhythm of the music, or else use newly-written texts.
2. The teacher or a student chooses a rhythm to perform; it is up to the others to recognize which one it is.
3. One student chooses a rhythm, and everyone repeats it. Then another chooses a rhythm for the others to repeat, and so on.
4. One student begins, and the others join in gradually.
5. Everyone begins together *pianissimo* and then grows to *fortissimo*; then vice versa.
6. One group beats the basic pulse, another beats the rhythm; at a signal from the

teacher, switch.

7. Choosing a phrase, the students pass it from one to another as in a relay race, with the caution not to drop the beat as they pass the phrase from one to the other.

8. In groups, start off by simultaneously performing two rhythms and then increase the number; each group performs a pre-established rhythm.

We could also develop the rhythmic activity by leveraging the students' rhythmic creativity. For example:

9. A group continuously performs one of the rhythms as an *ostinato*; one at a time, other students perform their own rhythmic inventions.

10. As above, but this time the *ostinato* changes along the way.

### "Va pensiero"

The most famous chorus of the opera, "Va pensiero," merits special attention. For the text, sung by the enslaved Hebrew people, the librettist Solera paraphrased verses from Psalm 137 (King James Version): "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land...If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth;

if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." Italian poet and Nobel prize-winner Salvatore Quasimodo (1901-1968) freely adapted these sentiments in his poem "E come potevamo noi cantare," which alludes to the Nazi occupation of Italy.

And how could we sing  
with the foreigner's foot on our hearts,  
among the dead abandoned in the streets,  
to the bleating cry of children,  
to the scream of a mother  
who went out and found her son  
crucified on a telegraph pole?  
From the branches of the willows, as an offering  
we also hung our harps.  
They whispered lightly in the mournful  
wind.

"Va pensiero" is so famous that it has crossed international borders. It is one of the best-known Italian works in the world. For example, it is the only Italian representative in a French collection<sup>6</sup> dedicated to the most important songs in the world, along with "La Marseillaise," "Amazing Grace," "Lily Marlene," "We Are the World," and "Les feuilles mortes" (known in English as "Autumn Leaves").

There are countless performances by modern singers. Some examples available on the internet:

- Zuccherò - Pavarotti:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bt9RTMDvX4>

- Zuccherò - Sinead ò 'Conner:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49qoTI9sXUM&feature=related>

- Tereza Kesovija:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2RZV>

[wyoJ44&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyoJ44&feature=related)

- Al Bano:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Glw\\_\\_LUZulc&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Glw__LUZulc&feature=related)

- Nana Moskouiri (in French):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AH3Mf6PfeoA&feature=related>

- (in Spanish):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9V62LAM19g&feature=related>

- Russell Watson (in English):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahylyKT2HFo&feature=related>

Other unusual arrangements available to on the internet:

- with crystal glasses filled with water:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHeB00Jhxus>

- performed by a group of ocarinas:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrdG1sF6gfc>

- by a special children's chorus:

[http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMTkwNT-k4NjQw.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTkwNT-k4NjQw.html)

Just click on "Va' pensiero" in any search engine to find many other versions.

### The soul of the characters

In addition to giving voice to a people through the music of an opera chorus, Verdi explored the psychological nature of his individual characters from his earliest days as a composer, writing arias that not only characterize them, but bring out their most subtle inner feelings. Remind the students to pay attention to the way the voice, the musical line, and the instrumental component amplify the emotional dimension of the characters.



Let's examine an important piece that will shed light on the characters. Ask the students to imagine the characters for themselves and compare their results with each other. More specifically, try to figure out the emotional state that each reveals (always in reference to the vocal line and the instrumental context).

#### Nabucco

First we'll listen to the title character, Nabucco, in one of his most significant scenes: "Chi mi toglie il regio scettro?" [Who robs me of the royal scepter?] from Part II, scene 8. It's a plot twist in which God himself (perhaps more characteristic of the Odyssey than the Bible!) snatches the crown from the blasphemous king's head. The indomitable arrogance that has sustained the king thus far comes crashing down with this supernatural event. What Verdi does here is a superb example of a transition from one emotion to another. At first, the divine intervention causes Nabucco both anger and terror. But suddenly, unexpectedly, the king is painfully brought low when he sees Fenena indifferent to her father's distress with "O mia figlia..." [Oh, my daughter]. Then a new anxious reaction of the unfortunate man in the grip of a hallucination: "Ah fantasmi ho sol presenti..." [Ah, I see only phantoms before me]. Unexpectedly, after a long pause barely punctuated by the accompaniment of the strings, he resumes the pathetic melody that he had addressed to his daughter a few moments earlier: "Ah, perché, perché dal ciglio" [Ah, why, why does my eye shed a tear]. Closing the scene is Abigaille's cry of triumph.

All this is real music drama, showing not only Verdi's readiness to break with tradition when in the grip of a strong dramatic idea, but also his ability to encompass a vast range of emotion within a small space. Few composers since Gluck have been willing to change from allegro to adagio in the course of a formal period as Verdi has done in Nabucco's solo. The depressive and manic phases of insanity are usually confined to andante and cabaletta respectively, where they are not distributed in recitative. How infinitely more impressive is Verdi's way in *Nabucco*!

We get to know Abigaille, Ismaele, and Fenena when they appear together in a scene. Let's begin with Abigaille's entrance, "Prode guerrier" [Brave warrior!] in Part I, scene 5.

#### Abigaille

Nabucco's adopted daughter, Abigaille, discovers the affair between Ismaele and Fenena. First she mocks a warrior who is better at courting women than fighting his enemies. The two descending half-steps in the strings that introduce the voice suggest Abigaille's indignation, which she sarcastically sings "Prode guerrier!" Everything is *lento* and *mezzo piano*. Then she bursts out in a full-voiced, vehement *allegro* as she threatens them with death: "Talamo la morte" [Your wedding bed will be your tomb]. (NB the melody plunging from high to low, imitating the descent into the tomb; this kind of procedure, in which the music depicts external events, has been practiced from the Renaissance to the present and is known as a *madrigalism* or *text painting*).

The fury of a woman scorned explodes in another madrigalism: rapid vocalizes that hurtle down from on high two times, the image of the wrath that will descend upon them like a thunderbolt.

Abigaille's ferocious intentions turn out to be the images of "furia" [fury] and "morte" [death] present in the libretto. But here Verdi gives greater attention to Abigaille's new approach: her attempt to win the beloved Ismaele for herself. The expressive atmosphere of the orchestra changes with the delicate introduction by the clarinet, the tempo changes to *andante*, and the melodic contour changes radically: now it is vibrant and passionate above an impetuous, rhythmically-charged accompaniment. A strong and energetic character emerges from the score to describe Abigaille—a character reminiscent of Amneris, the rival of the title character in *Aida*.

#### Ismaele

Ismaele responds to Abigaille with "Ah no! la vita t'abbandono" [Ah, no! I offer up my life to you]. The Israelite prince prefers death to deserting Fenena. In the construction of this passage we see a typical operatic procedure: Verdi doesn't give Ismaele a different melody, as we would expect of a psychological state so different from Abigaille's. Instead we hear the same melody that Abigaille sang earlier. We call this a *strophic form*, the same form found in popular songs. It is a way, we could say, to hear the two characters "in sync" with each other emotionally: Abigaille's intensity is reflected in Ismaele's. Unrequited love is an essential and inevitable ingredient in operas. But in *Nabucco* it

is secondary, remaining in the background. Ismaele is a lackluster figure, limited to his grief-stricken protest against the curse called down upon him by his people.

#### Fenena

Fenena is a more vivid musical presence. We become aware of this when she joins her rival and her lover in this scene, praying to the God she is now accepting: "Già t'invoco, già ti sento" [Now I call on you, now I accept you]. Her status as Verdi's favorite character in this ensemble becomes clear when we hear the violins doubling her vocal line. With her entrance, the scene becomes a *trio*: the simultaneous song, in counterpoint, of three characters. Point out to the students that this expressive device doesn't exist in spoken theater, since three characters talking at the same time would create confusion. Verdi blends them into a superb harmony, which makes the dramatic situation clear, while at the same time revealing each character's emotional state.

The students will already understand this technique if they have sung *canons* or *rounds*. We could supplement this topic with the canon for four voices "S'appresan gl'istanti" [The time draws near] (Part II, scene 8). The theme is sung, in sequence, by Nabucco, Abigaille, Ismaele, and Fenena. Lindenberger, whom we cited earlier, wrote that when faced with these pieces, the spectator understands the essence of the drama, thanks to strictly musical elements: the particular color of the voices, the harmonic treatment, and, above all, the charm and power achieved by the combination of superb voices.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Ismaele,

Fenena has her own aria in the opera's finale: "Oh dischiuso è il firmamento" (Part IV, scene 3), an aria that confirms the warm and devoted character of the king's true daughter.

#### Zaccaria

The High Priest of the Hebrews is the most vital character on stage. For the most bellicose of his statements in his capacity as leader of the people, listen to his invitation to give "morte allo stranier" [death to the foreigner]. Impassioned scenes like this ("Come notte a sol fulgente" in Part I, scene 3) electrified the first hearers of *Nabucco*, who in the 1840s were preparing for the outbreak of the Risorgimento conflicts. "The verses unite two central 'themes' of the drama: religion and patriotism. It is expressed through the vocal melody that is closely linked to the chorus 'Va pensiero,' in which the 'voice' of Jehovah is heard above the rolling sixteenth-notes of the accompaniment."<sup>9</sup>

Zaccaria is again the protagonist in the scene that gives rise to the rest of the opera, in which Ismaele prevents Zaccaria from stabbing the hostage Fenena, provoking the curse that will fall upon Ismaele's head. But Zaccaria is not driven merely by a warlike spirit: in the third scene of Part II, we encounter his profoundly religious spirit. Solera's words basically portray an uncompromising leader, but the cellos that introduce his aria immerse us in an atmosphere of prayer, grave and moving, as the instruments play this highly chromatic passage. "Vieni, o Levita" [Come, o Levites]: a dispassionate summons, without instruments. "Di novel por-

tento..." [God wants me to carry out...]: a resolute affirmation, seemingly unquestionable. And finally, the prayer itself, flowing quietly at "Tu sul labbro de' veggenti" [Thou who hast condemned] and fervently rising at the thought of divine protection: "E di canti a te sacriati" [And with songs sacred to Thee].

While we are thinking about this piece, it would be a good time for reflection with the students about how all musicians, like other artists, are naturally *influenced* by their predecessors and teachers. The cultural soil, stylistic and linguistic, in which artists develop forms a substrate for their art that may or may not be obvious. This is not to say that they simply *copy*: new artists take the raw materials, the artistic lexicon, and reconstitute them in their own way. Verdi could not have been unaware of a similar musical situation to which the students might listen: the beginning of the overture to Rossini's *William Tell*. Rossini also entrusts the beginning to solo cellos; here they are also connected to a religious atmosphere in this opera, which premiered in 1829, some twelve years before the premiere of *Nabucco*.

At the end of opera, Verdi seems to have made another reference to *William Tell* when he accompanies the death of Abigail with an orchestration featuring solo cello, English horn, and harp. This orchestration deserves comparison with the crisis point in Rossini's opera, when Tell is about to shoot the arrow and advises his son to stand still (Act III, scene 3): "Resta immobile, e ver la terra inchina un ginocchio a pregar" [Stand still, and truly the earth bends its knee in prayer].

#### First Approach to the Overture

The instrumental piece that opens *Nabucco* is a large symphonic construction that deserves its own investigation in school. We can understand it as a kind of synopsis, a summary of the important moments in the drama. In fact, Verdi stitches together the important musical motives from the opera one after another, according to the pre-existing formal tradition of the *pot-pourri* (which he was to reuse in some oth-

er operas; if we want to expand our listening, we could compare this overture to the one from *La forza del destino*).

Let's look at two ways of presenting this material to the students. In the first, we analyze the overture, connecting the instrumental episodes to the musical motives that we will hear sung during the opera. Verdi chooses at least five. First he writes an introduction:

#### Motive A

A solemn prayer, performed *piano* by the trombones and the *cimbasso* (a special kind of trombone)

**Andante**

The prayer is brusquely interrupted by a *fortissimo* explosion by the entire orchestra. When the motive resumes, it leads to the second motive.

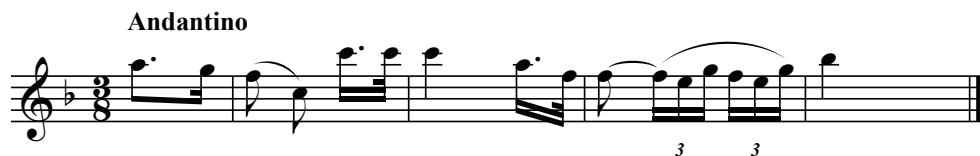
#### Motive B

This is the aggressive motive sung by the Hebrews in Part II when they banish Ismaele, believing him to be a traitor because of his love for the Assyrian Fenena:

**Allegro**

## Motive C

In the next episode, the oboe and clarinet present the melody that the chorus will sing in Part III, “Va pensiero sull’ali dorate.” We don’t hear it as such, though. Verdi modifies it, transforming it from a more solemn quaternary meter to ternary meter, almost like a waltz:



## Motive D

He returns right away to the motive of banishment into exile (B), which now opens into a fourth motive. In the opera it is sung by the Assyrian priests when they turn over the scepter to the usurper, Abigaille: “Noi già sparso abbiamo fama “



## Motive E

The last motive, the curse hurled at Ismaele: “Dalle genti sii reietto” [May you be rejected by the people]:



A particularly accurate way of guiding listening to these motives (B through E; A is unique to the overture) is to play them in their original versions from the corresponding place in the opera, reflecting on the relationship between the message, the expressive character of the motive, and the way in which Verdi gives it substance (the type of melody, the rhythm, dynamics, instrumentation, etc.)

The overture continues, reprising some of the above motives.

Involve the students by having them recognize the motives in a subsequent hearing of the entire overture. Ask them to fill out their own maps of the succession of themes. The correct sequence, and therefore the result we should expect is this (we could give this out with some of the boxes already filled in):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I

**Second Approach to the Overture**

An alternative to the previous activity calls on the students’ imaginations. Without recounting the plot, list only the characters and their situations, with a minimal description of each. Have the students listen to the principal motives of the overture, and ask each to assign the motives to one or another character. They will make their choices quite freely, as expected: the object is not to determine if they can correctly match the music and the situation as Verdi did, but to stimulate active listening to the excerpts and personal interpretations. At the end of the activity, the students should compare results with each other, and of course, with Verdi’s solution.

We could go even further by combining the two approaches. Ask the students, in groups, to use the characters to invent their own complete storyline. Again, let them be influenced by listening to the overture, taking into account the different parts of the piece and the differences be-

tween the motives.

It’s essential to compare with Verdi’s original again. And it wouldn’t be so bad if the students (and maybe their teachers) decided that their imaginary plot is better than the original libretto’s.

**Five Steps**

After the overture, there are four more symphonic passages (of which the first will be repeated later, at two different times) that Verdi uses to introduce as many scenes.

- The first is part of the finale to Part I, when the Assyrians storm in to occupy the Hebrew territory; we hear it again abbreviated in the opening of Part III, reminding us that we find ourselves once more amongst the Assyrians; and then again in the middle of the prelude to Part IV.

- The second passage, which introduces Zaccaria’s prayer, in Part II

- The prelude to Part IV is the most structured of the four. We find ourselves in the room where Nabucco is held prisoner, and

Verdi dramatizes the scene in three different musical situations: first, a tumultuous *allegro*; then an *andante cantabile*, brusquely interrupted and followed by the march we've already heard twice, associated with the Assyrians.

- The funeral march that accompanies Fenena to her execution, which is later avoided.

Let's look at a couple of the possible activities we could try with the students. In the first, let's imagine we are stage directors faced with staging the prelude to Part IV. Listen to it again carefully. In small groups, have the students come up with a storyline based on the three parts of the piece. Remind them that the prelude comes after Zaccaria's call for an upris-

ing (and after "Va pensiero") and before Nabucco's anguished change of heart. Who do we put on stage? In what location? For what reasons? To do what? Remind them that the third motive is associated with the Assyrians.

The second activity invites us to think about the meaning of a march. First, compare the heroic march from Part I with the funeral march from the finale. What characteristics set them apart? The first difference is elementary and has to do with pace: a heroic march has a martial and deliberate step, while a funeral march goes slowly. Another observation concerns the basic rhythmic units; the heroic march has precise and spirited rhythmic movements:

### Allegro



In the funeral march we observe the long note in the melody, as opposed to the dotted rhythm of the accompaniment:

### Adagio

Let's go further with our investigation. What meanings do we associate with a march? The march only applies in situa-

tions of *discipline*. The case of soldiers is most applicable: the platoon must move simultaneously to execute battle moves.

Discipline, in this case, is obedience to an order: the "step"—in other words, the speed—can't be set, or ordered, except by *one* person; all the others must adapt themselves.

This gives rise to thinking about the broader moral significance of a march—of its *connotations*—that will have decisive implications for the significance of march music, and merits investigation by the students: does it connote physical or moral discipline, obedience, authority, and so on.

But how to explain a *funeral* march? Who marches at a funeral? On what occasions? Clearly not every-day occasions. Today a funeral is a very private ceremony attended by family and friends. No one would dream of marching. The march has something "official" about it: it is used for grand ceremonies. Everyone walking all at the same pace—ideally, if not actually—with the same movement, could only signify one thing: a type of moral "unison." The group identifies itself as a single person in homage to the departed; individual feelings are laid aside. The music of a march is always a signal of a *social consensus*.

In a theatrical episode like this one in our opera, the sole connotation amongst the various possible connotations of the march is the sanctity of death, here expressed by the measured cadence by which our heroine, Fenena, is accompanied to the scaffold.

### Sublime Finales

How does Nabucco end? If we look at the score or listen to our CD, we'll find one of the most beautiful passages in opera:

the aria sung by the dying Abigaille. If we examine the last page of the libretto published by Ricordi during the nineteenth century, we'll see that the aria isn't there.

Ricordi did not follow the established practice at that time: Abigaille's aria was suppressed in order to end the work with the triumph of the people, liberated at last. The scene in which Abigaille asks pardon from Fenena and from God before dying as a suicide might seem to strike a false note. And perhaps it has. Verdi himself was aware of this cut made in performances of his day, and he probably accepted it. Since we have become accustomed to plot twists in modern novels and films, we would not be astonished by the unexpected appearance of the villainess in the guise of sacrificial lamb. But aside from this, it is the very expressive intensity of the aria that makes it proof against cutting it.

Abigaille's aria gives us a chance to deepen our appreciation of Verdi's art. Nineteenth-century operas usually ended with the death of the heroine, less frequently the hero. Norma dies in Bellini's opera of that name, and Lucia dies in *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Donizetti. Verdi was well acquainted with the work of his predecessors and adhered to that tradition beginning with his first opera, *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio*. In her turn, Abigaille, the female character treated the most expressively (even affectionately) by Verdi, ends the drama by sacrificing herself. But what matters is the manner in which the music gives her voice and soul. Over the repeated motive with which the cello accompanies the voice, from her entrance

at “Su me... morente... esanime...” [To me... dying... lifeless...], the soprano traces a line descending chromatically in the minor mode (E minor); the entire scene is *adagio*, the voice unmistakably full of sorrow and regret. But suddenly the atmosphere changes: Verdi moves decisively into the major mode. Not only that, but he reverses the direction of the melodic line: no longer descending, but rising upward, beginning at “Vieni! Costor s’amavano” [Come, these two love one another] and reaching the height at her final verses, starting at “Solleva, Iddio” [God raises up]. The heights, heaven, paradise: since the beginning of opera and even before, the melodic ascension on high suggests exaltation and catharsis. The heroine offers herself as a sacrificial victim, atoning for the evils that have occurred throughout the opera. Verdi returns to this plot model in his successive operas. Listening to some other famous examples can illuminate the finale of *Nabucco*. There is an embarrassment of riches when it comes to these *sublime* apotheoses (think of Plato’s ideal of *the sublime*) that close some of Verdi’s operas. “Lassù in cielo, vicina alla madre” [Up in Heaven, close to my mother], sings Gilda, the innocent victim of her father Rigoletto’s obsession with revenge. The ascending melody type returns, when Leonora in *Il trovatore* confesses to her Manrico that she has sacrificed herself for him. The generous invitation is seen again when the dying Violetta recommends that Alfredo marry a “pudica vergine” [chaste virgin], and once again, her sublime apotheosis is obvious in the high melody of the violins that recalls, *lento*, the famous motive of

the young couple’s love. We can see the cathartic type in the finale of *La forza del destino*, where the unhappy Leonora expects to see her Alvaro follow her to heaven. We can close the loop on the sublime finale with possibly the most clear example in which a melody in the high register signals a cathartic redemption: the final scene of *Aida*, where the two lovers see heaven opening to them (“dischiudersi il ciel”), their voices repeating the ascending line that is finally carried to its highest extreme by the violins alone, evoking Verdi’s sublime moment.

In romantic opera, and especially in Verdi, it’s almost always the women who pay the price for the villainous plots hatched by men. The trend ends typically with the tragic heroines of Puccini: Manon, Mimì, Tosca, Butterfly, Suor Angelica, Liù. But Puccini’s world is quite different from Verdi’s: the heroic redemption will be replaced by our emotional participation in the fate of his unhappy creatures.

#### NOTES

1. ELIAS CANETTI, *La provincia dell’uomo*, Milano, Adelphi, 1978, 35.
2. HERBERT LINDENBERGER, *Opera, the Extravagant Art*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1984, 125.
3. Risorgimento, (“Rising Again”), 19th-century movement for Italian unification that culminated in the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The Risorgimento was an ideological and literary movement that helped to arouse the national consciousness of the Italian people, and it led to a series of political events that freed the Italian states from foreign domination and united them politically. <http://www.britannica.com/EB-checked/topic/504489/Risorgimento>
4. LINDENBERGER, *Opera, the Extravagant Art*, 284-285.
5. The entire text can be found in Italian in the Guaraldi edition (Rimini, 2009) or in English in

- Franco Sciannameo’s edited and annotated text, *Giuseppe Mazzini’s Philosophy of Music (1836)—Envisioning a Social Opera: English Translation by E.A.V. (1867)*, Lewiston, N.Y., Edwin Mellen Press, 2004.
6. BERTRAND DICALÈ, *Ces chansons qui font l’histoire*, Paris, Textuel, 2010.
  7. JULIAN BUDDEN, *The Operas of Verdi: I, From “Oberto” to “Rigoletto”*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1992, 105.
  8. LINDENBERGER, *Opera, the Extravagant Art*, 19.
  9. FRITS NOSKE, *Dentro l’opera*, Venice, Marsilio, 1993, 304.

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