



## **Giuseppe Verdi: Composer, Showman and Moralist**

***Art Axelrod***



## **The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester**

**Guild Address:**

P.O. Box 92245  
Rochester, NY 14692

**Guild EMail:**

[guild@operarochester.org](mailto:guild@operarochester.org)

**Mercury Opera Website:**

[www.mercuryoperarochester.org](http://www.mercuryoperarochester.org)

**Guild Website:**

[www.operarochester.org](http://www.operarochester.org)

**Guild Contacts:**

Dr. Agneta Borgstedt, Chair – (585) 334-2323  
Mary McNamara, Vice Chair – (585) 473-5456  
Helga Strasser, Trip Coordinator – (585) 586-2274

## Context: Verdi's Italy



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## Context: Italian Unification *The Risorgimento*

- ◆ From the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century until 1861, the Italian peninsula was no longer a unified nation, but a group of independent states, often feuding, occasionally at war with one another, and frequently dominated by foreign nations.
- ◆ During most of Verdi's productive years, the *Risorgimento*, the movement that brought the Italian nation into being, was taking place.
- ◆ Verdi was deeply influenced by this movement, and supported it through his art.

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## Verdi and The *Risorgimento*

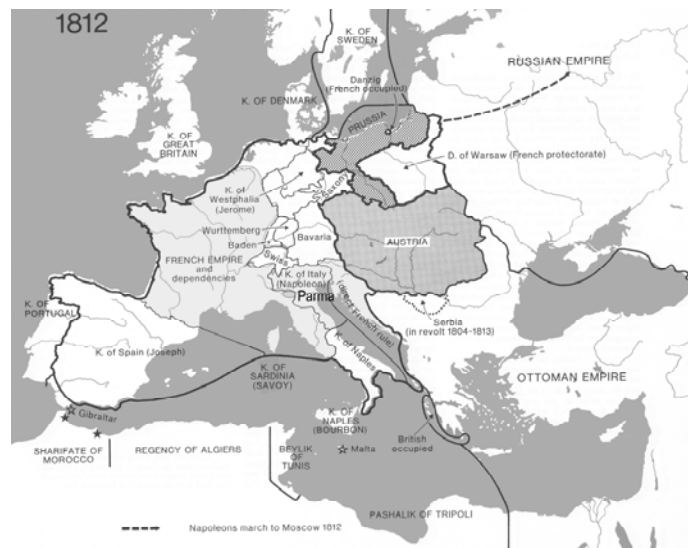
- 1796-1814 Napoleon annexes much of the Italian Peninsula for France.
- 1813 Verdi's birth
- 1814 Napoleon defeated at Waterloo.
- 1815 Congress of Vienna awards much of Italian Peninsula to Austria
- 1820-1850 A series of uprisings throughout the Peninsula. Giuseppe Mazzini, Count Camillo di Cavour and Giuseppe Garibaldi lead the movement.
- 1832-1835 Verdi studies in Milan
- 1842 *Nabucco*
- 1849 Victor Emmanuel II becomes king of independent Kingdom of Sardinia
- 1859 Sardinia and France under Napoleon III defeat Austrians.
- 1861 Kingdom of Italy is proclaimed under Victor Emmanuel II
- 1871 *Aida*
- 1870 French troops abandon Rome; Italian troops occupy.
- 1871 Rome made capital of Kingdom of Italy
- 1893 *Falstaff*
- 1901 Verdi dies at 88

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## Italian Peninsula - 1812



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## Verdi's Birth and Childhood

- 1813    October 9 (or 10): Giuseppe Verdi born in Roncole, suburb of Busseto, Duchy of Parma.
- Parents, Carlo and Luigia Verdi; father was an inn-keeper. Giuseppe was their first child.
  - Named "Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi".
  - Parma (as well as about half of the Italian Peninsula) was under French domination. Giuseppe was born a French citizen. He was registered as "Joseph-Françoise Fortunin Verdi".
  - Busseto and Parma now in the Region of Emilia-Romagna

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## Childhood and Teenage Years

- 1813-31    Through age 18, received classical and musical education in Roncole and Busseto.
- Educated by local priests. Received classical and musical instruction in Busseto.
  - Musical talent was recognized. Developed considerable musical abilities. Produced a number of compositions.
  - *"From the ages of 13 to 18, I wrote a motley assortment of pieces: marches for band by the hundred, perhaps as many sinfonie, that were used in church, in the theater and at concerts, five or six concertos and sets of variations for pianoforte, which I played myself at concerts . . ."*
- 1829    Gioachino Rossini, the reigning master of Italian Opera, presents his last production, *Guillaume Tell*, in Paris.
- Though Rossini will live another 39 years, until 1868, he will never write another opera.
  - Bellini dies 1835, Donizetti dies 1848

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## Verdi's Childhood Home



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## Teenage and Young Adulthood

1831      Age 18. Moves into home of Antonio Barezzi in Busseto

- Barezzi an affluent merchant; amateur musician, ardent music lover and patron of the arts – becomes Verdi's patron
- Barezzi was a social liberal: pro-republican, anti-monarchic and anti-clerical. Carlo Verdi was conservative: pro-monarchic, staunch church supporter.
- Verdi adopts Barezzi's philosophy. Barezzi becomes Verdi's "spiritual father".
- Becomes semi-estranged from Carlo and Luigia.
- Verdi falls in love with Barezzi's daughter Margherita and they become engaged.

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## Margherita Barezzi Verdi



Augusto Mussini, c. 1835

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## Teenage and Young Adult

### 1832 Age 19. Verdi travels to Milan

- Rejected at Milan Conservatory; he was 4 years over customary age and disapproval of his unorthodox piano technique. (Verdi would be resentful all his life.)
- Studies with eminent teacher, Vincenzo Lavigna. Financial support from Barezzi.
- Lavigna encourages Verdi's theatrical interests and introduces him to Milanese musical society.
- Verdi established as a musician.

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## 1835-40 Busseto, Milan and Tragedy

- 1835 Age 22. Returns to Busseto as *Maestro di Musica*
- With Barezzi's support. There is considerable political wrangling surrounding his appointment.
- 1836 Marries Margherita
- They have two children, a daughter and a son, but neither survives past one year.
- 1836 Composes opera, *Rocester*, (*Rochester*), never staged.
- 1839 Leaves Busseto for Milan
- 1839 First opera, *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio*, premieres at La Scala
- Greatly revised and renamed version of *Rocester*
  - Modest success, establishes him as a serious composer
- 1840 Age 27. Margherita dies. Verdi is emotionally devastated.
- In the course of four years, has lost beloved wife and two children – goes into severe depression.
- 1840 *Un giorno di regno* (*King for a Day*) presented at La Scala.
- Complete failure – hissed off the stage!

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## 1842-47 "Years in the Galleys"

- 1842 Premiere of *Nabucco* at La Scala. A total success that secures Verdi's reputation.
- Well-known soprano, Giuseppina Streppone, as Abigaille.

At this point, Verdi had become famous, and his fame and celebrity increased with each successive, mostly successful opera. But at the same time, he continues to be distraught over the loss of his wife and children.

- 1843 *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (La Scala, Milan)
- 1844 *Ernani* (La Fenice, Venice)
- 1844 *I due Foscari* (Teatro Argentina, Rome)
- 1845 *Giovanna d'Arco* (La Scala, Milan)
- 1845 *Alzira* (Teatro San Carlo, Naples)
- 1846 *Attila* (La Fenice, Venice)
- 1847 *Macbeth* (Teatro della Pergola, Florence)

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### 1847-51: Streppone, Revolution, Sant'Agata

- 1847 *I masnadieri* (*The Brigands*), London, and *Jérusalem* (revision of *I Lombardi*), Paris
- First premieres outside of Italian Peninsula
- 1847 Verdi and Giuseppina Streppone become lovers and set up housekeeping in Paris.
- 1848 Revolutionary uprisings throughout Italian Peninsula. Verdi is present during uprising in Milan. Verdi is highly supportive of Unification efforts.
- 1851 Verdi and Giuseppina move to farm at Sant'Agata, outside Busseto, home of Verdi's ancestors
- Verdi is now world famous and an Italian hero.
  - Sant'Agata will be their home for the rest of their lives.

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## Giuseppina Streppone

about 1840



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## Verdi and the *Risorgimento*

- ◆ The 1840s – 1850s was the climactic period of the *Risorgimento*, the movement toward Italian Unification.
- ◆ Verdi was very nationalistic and supportive of the movement. His operas of this period were taken as tributes to the revolutionary philosophy of the *Risorgimento*.
  - Especially the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves, "*Va pensiero sull'ali dorate*" from *Nabucco*, which became an anthem for the new Italian state.
- ◆ At the center of the *Risorgimento* was Victor Emanuel II, King of Sardinia.
  - Piedmont-Sardinia was the only independent state in the Italian Peninsula that had a strong standing army.
  - The name VERDI became identified as an acronym for the putative title, *Vittorio Emmanuelle, Re D'Italia*.

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## Viva VERDI!



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## 1849-59 "The People's Composer"

Verdi's popular success continues:

- 1849 *La battaglia di Legnano*, Rome
- 1849 *Luisa Miller*, Naples
- 1850 *Stiffelio*, Trieste

The "Big Three":

- 1851 *Rigoletto*, Venice
- 1853 *Il trovatore*, Rome
- 1853 *La traviata*, Venice
  
- 1855 *Les vêpres sicilennes*, Paris
- 1857 *Simon Boccanegra*, Venice
- 1859 *Un ballo in maschera*, Rome

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## The Kingdom of Italy

- 1859 Austria defeated by Sardinia-Piedmont under Victor Emanuel, in alliance with France.
- 1859 29 August, Verdi and Giuseppina are married.
- 1861 Kingdom of Italy is proclaimed.
  - Verdi had been invited to run for the Chamber of Deputies and was elected; voted for the Proclamation (but soon thereafter resigned).
- 1871 Rome is made capital of Kingdom of Italy.

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## Last Works

- 1862 *La forza del destino*, Imperial Theater, St. Petersburg, Russia
- 1867 *Don Carlos*, Paris
- 1871 *Aida*, Cairo
- 1874 *Requiem Mass*
- 1887 *Otello*, La Scala, Milan
- 1893 *Falstaff*, La Scala (his last opera)
- 1897 Giuseppina dies at Sant'Agata
  - They had been together 50 years.
- 1901 19 January, Verdi dies in Milan hotel, age 88
  - During funeral procession through Milan, the crowd, assisted by the Orchestra and Chorus of La Scala, sang "Va pensiero" from *Nabucco*.

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## Common Themes in Verdi's Operas

- ◆ Most center on profound ethical dilemmas
- ◆ Depict acts of Fate, against which man is helpless and his efforts in vain
- ◆ Suspicion of the Clergy
- ◆ Often, love affair is subordinate (sometimes virtually non-existent)
- ◆ Preoccupation with parent-child relationships (often father-daughter)
- ◆ Patriotism and (often veiled) nationalism
  - Carefully skirting censorship
- ◆ After the early failure, *Giorno di regno*, only *Falstaff*, his last opera, is a comedy

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## Verdi's Extravagant Plots

" . . . in opera what is needed above all is musicality: fire, spirit, vigour, and enthusiasm."

Verdi, 1872, in a letter

"copying the truth may be a good thing, but *inventing the truth* is better, much better"

Verdi, 1876, in a letter, referring to the *verismo* movement

Conclusion: The plot is not intended to be taken as a literal narrative, but rather as a framework for the music. It is the music which will convey the dramatic and emotional content of the work.

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## Showman and Artist

"The box office is the proper thermometer of success"

Verdi, late in his career, in a letter

"I have adored and still adore this art, and when I'm struggling on my own with my notes . . . I'm moved and delighted beyond telling, but if I think that these poor notes of mine have to be thrown . . . to a publisher who sells them for the *entertainment* or *contempt* of the masses, then I no longer love anything! [italics mine]

Verdi, 1843, letter to librettist Francesco Piave

Conclusion: Verdi felt deeply that he had something important to say. He wanted audiences to understand him and so he needed them to attend. But he was unhappy when he felt he was being misunderstood, or taken for "mere" entertainment.

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## 1842 - Nabucco: Nationalism and Yearning for the Homeland

**"Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate"**  
**(Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves)**

1991

Orchestra and Chorus of the German  
Opera of Berlin, Giuseppe Sinopoli,  
cond.

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## Nabucco

Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 - 1901

Libretto by Temistocle Solera, based on  
History of the Babylonian Captivity,

First Performance, 1842, Milan

Set in Jerusalem and Babylon, 587 BC

"Va, pensiero sull'ali dorate": The exiled  
Hebrew slaves in Babylon, laboring on  
the banks of the Tigris, lament their  
exile and dream of their Homeland.

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**"Va, pensiero"**  
from Verdi's *Nabucco*

Fly, my thoughts, on gilded wings;  
Go, rest on the slopes and mounts  
Where the sweet breezes  
Of our native soil give off a sweet perfume  
The banks of Jordan, greet,  
And the fallen towers of Zion...  
Oh my country, so beautiful and so lost!  
Oh remembrance so dear and so desperate!

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**"Va, pensiero" (cont.)**

Golden harp of the prophetic poets,  
Why do you hang so silently from the willow?  
Reignite the memories in our hearts,  
Speak to us of the times which once were!  
O like Solomon draw forth a sound  
Of raw lament to destiny,  
Or may the Lord inspire you to a harmony  
Which instills the courage to suffer!

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## 1851: Rigoletto – The Overprotective Father

### **“Bella figlia dell’amore” (The Quartet)**

Plácido Domingo (t), Ileana Cotrubas (s), Piero  
Cappuccilli (br), Elena Obraztsova (ms) - 1980

Vienna Philharmonic, Carlo Maria Giulini, cond.

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## 1851: Rigoletto

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave, after the play,  
*Le roi s’amuse* by Victor Hugo, 1832

First Performance, 1851, La Fenice, Venice

Rigoletto, court jester to the Duke of Mantua,  
tries to protect his daughter who is seduced by  
the amoral Duke

The Quartet: while the Duke toys with a  
courtesan, Rigoletto demonstrates to Gilda that  
the Duke is untrue and swears revenge

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## The Quartet from *Rigoletto* "Bella figlia dell' amore"

DUKE (*to Maddalena*)

Fairest daughter of love, I am a slave to your charms; with but a single word you could relieve my every pain. Come, touch my breast and feel how my heart is racing.

MADDALENA (*to the Duke*)

Ha! Ha! That really makes me laugh; talk like that is cheap enough. Believe me, I know exactly what such play-acting is worth! I, my fine sir, am quite accustomed to foolish jokes like this.

GILDA (*in anguish*)

Oh, these are the loving words the scoundrel spoke once to me! O wretched heart betrayed, do not break for sorrow.

RIGOLETTO (*to Gilda*)

Hush, weeping can do no good... You are now convinced he was lying. Hush, and leave it up to me to hasten our revenge. It will be quick, it will be deadly, I know how to deal with him.

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## 1853 – La Traviata: Ethical Dilemma and Sacrifice

### Scene: Violetta and M. Germont (Video)

Teresa Stratas (s), Cornell Mac Neil (br) -  
1982

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James  
Levine, cond.

Movie version directed by Franco Zeffirelli

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## 1853: La Traviata

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave based on *La dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils (1852)

First Performance, 1853, La Fenice, Venice

A courtesan, dying of consumption, must choose between her lover, Alfredo, and the welfare of his family

Scene: Alfredo's father has come to ask Violetta to end her affair so that Alfredo's younger sister can marry a wealthy young man. Violetta finally agrees.

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## 1853 – Il Trovatore: Mystical Bond Between Brothers

### **“Mal reggendo all'aspro assalto”**

Plácido Domingo (t), Brigitte Fassbaender (ms) - 1984

Orchestra of the Academy of Santa Cecilia, Carlo Maria Giulini, cond.

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## 1853: Il Trovatore

Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano and  
Emmanuele Bardare based on *El Trovador* by  
Antonio Garcia Gutiérrez (1836)

First Performance, 1853, Rome

Manrico, a troubadour, son of a Gypsy woman,  
Azucena, is at war with the cruel, despotic  
Count di Luna.

Scene: Manrico describes to his mother a  
moment when he had an opportunity to kill di  
Luna in battle, but was stopped by an  
uncanny impulse. (Unknown to Manrico, di  
Luna is his brother and Azucena is not  
actually his mother.)

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### Mal reggendo all'aspro assalto

MANRICO (*referring to his enemy, the Count di Luna*)

He was helpless under my savage attack and  
had fallen to the ground.

The blow that was meant to kill flashed above  
his head when my arm, as it slashed down,  
was mysteriously held back!

Suddenly I felt a chill run sharply through my  
body, and I heard a voice from heaven cry  
out: "Do not strike!"

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## **Mal reggendo all'aspro assalto - 2**

AZUCENA

But the voice of heaven did not speak to the  
ungrateful wretch's heart!

Oh, if ever again fate brings you face to face in  
combat with the villain, obey my command, my  
son, as if it were the word of God:

AZUCENA

Thrust your blade in to  
the hilt and pierce the  
scoundrel's heart!

MANRICO

Yes, I swear it: my  
blade shall pierce the  
scoundrel's heart!

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## **1857: Simon Boccanegra**

(1881 version)

**A Father Finds his Long-Lost Daughter**

**Duet: Boccanegra discovers that "Amelia  
Grimaldi" is actually his daughter Maria**

(Video)

Giancarlo Pasquetto (br), Elena Prokina (s), 1998  
London Philharmonic Orchestra, Mark Elder,  
cond.

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## 1857 – Simon Boccanegra

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave after a drama by Antonio Garcia Gutiérrez, 1843. Libretto revised by Boito in 1881.

First Performance, 1857, La Fenice, Venice;

Revised Version: 1881, La Scala, Milan

Set in Genoa, 14<sup>th</sup> Century describing political struggles of the doge and the city-state

Simon and his daughter: Boccanegra learns that the girl he knows as Amelia Grimaldi is actually his daughter, Maria.

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## 1867: Don Carlo – Conflict between Father and Son

### **Duet: King Philip and the Grand Inquisitor**

Boris Christoff (b), Giulio Neri (b) - 1955

Orchestra of the Opera Theater of Rome,  
Gabrielli Santini, cond.

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## 1867 - Don Carlo

Libretto based on dramatic poem by Schiller, 1787 and play by Eugène Cormon, 1846.  
(Several French and Italian versions of the libretto exist.)

First Performance, 1867, Paris (French version)  
Set in royal courts of France (act I) and Spain (acts II-V), 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Philip and the Inquisitor: Philip believes that Carlo is plotting for freedom for the Low Countries; he seeks advice from the Inquisitor.

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## King Philip and the Grand Inquisitor

COUNT OF LERMA  
The Grand Inquisitor!

*(The Grand Inquisitor, aged ninety and blind, enters supported by two Dominican monks)*

INQUISITOR  
Am I in the King's presence?

PHILIP

Yes; I sent for you, father! I am in doubt. Carlo is filling my heart with bitter sadness; the Infante is rebelling against me, he has taken up arms against his father.

What mode of punishment do you choose?

Extreme measures.

Let me know them!

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## King Philip and the Grand Inquisitor - 2

INQUISITOR

Well?

The peace of the empire is  
worth a rebel's life.

To redeem us, God sacrificed  
His.

PHILIP

Let him escape or let the axe . . .

If I send my son to death, will  
your hand absolve me?

Can I, a Christian, sacrifice my  
son for the world?

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## King Philip and the Grand Inquisitor - 3

INQUISITOR

Everywhere it will have force,  
as it had it on Calvary.

Everything must be silenced in  
order to exalt the faith.

Has the King nothing further to  
ask me?

PHILIP

But can you put into force such a  
stringent law?

Can nature and love be silenced  
in me?

Very well!

No!

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## 1871: Aida

Aida, an Ethiopian princess, is torn between her love for an Egyptian general and her love and duty to her homeland

**"Qui Radames verra! ... O patria mia"**  
(Video)

Aprille Millo, 1989

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.

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## 1871: Aida

Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni after a story draft by Auguste Mariette

First Performance 1871, Cairo

Set in Ancient Egypt.

"O patria mia": The Ethiopian princess Aida expresses her grief over the loss of her homeland because of her love for the Egyptian general Radames.

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## 1887: Otello

The personification of evil

### **"Credo in un Dio crudel"**

Sherrill Milnes (br), 1978

National Philharmonic Orchestra, James  
Levine, cond.

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## 1887: Otello

Libretto by Arrigo Boito after  
Shakespeare's *Othello*, 1604

First Performance 1887, La Scala, Milan

Set in 15<sup>th</sup> century in a Venetian colony  
on Cyprus.

"Credo in un Dio crudel": Iago explains  
the basis of his evil nature. (This scene  
is Verdi's invention and does not appear  
in Shakespeare.)

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## Credo in un Dio crudel

IAGO

*(alone, paying no further heed to Cassio)*

I believe in a cruel God, who has created me in  
his image and whom, in hate, I name.

From some vile germ or atom base am I born. I  
am evil because I am a man, and I feel the  
primeval slime in me.

Yes! This is my creed! I believe with a firm  
heart, as ever does the young widow praying  
before the altar, that whatever evil I think or  
do was decreed for me by Fate.

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## Credo in un Dio crudel - 2

I believe that the honest man is but a poor  
actor, both in face and heart, that everything  
in him is a lie: tears, kisses, looks, sacrifices  
and honor.

And I believe man to be the sport of an unjust  
fate from the germ of the cradle to the worm  
of the grave.

After all this mockery comes Death.

And then? And then? Death is nothingness,  
heaven is an old wives' tale.

*{Laughs sardonically}*

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## 1893: Falstaff

Life is a joke and he who laughs last,  
laughs best.

### **Final Chorus and Fugue**

Bryn Terfel (br), Barbara Frittoli (s), 1999  
(Video)

Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera  
House, Bernard Haitink, cond.

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## 1893: Falstaff

Libretto by Arrigo Boito after Shakespeare's  
*Merry Wives of Windsor* with material from  
*Henry IV*, parts I and II, 1597

First Performance 1893, La Scala, Milan

Set in Windsor, England during reign of Henry  
IV.

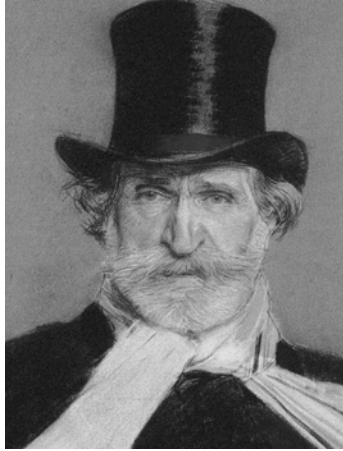
After the comic plotting is foiled, Sir John leads  
the company in a fugal chorus celebrating the  
absurdity of the human condition.

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Grazie



Portrait of Verdi, Giovanni Boldini (1886)

e buona sera!

# Playlist

## Giuseppe Verdi

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### **1842: Nabucco – Nationalism: Yearning for the Homeland**

1. “Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate” (Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves) (4:57)  
1983  
Orchestra and Chorus of the German Opera of Berlin, Giuseppe Sinopoli, cond.  
Deutsche Grammophon 435 415-2

### **1851: Rigoletto – The Overprotective Father**

2. “Bella figlia dell’amore” (The Quartet) (4:23)  
Placido Domingo (t), Ileana Cotrubas (s), Piero Cappuccilli (br), Elena Obraztsova (ms) - 1980  
Vienna Philharmonic, Carlo Maria Giulini, cond.  
Deutsche Grammophon 457 753-2

### **1853: La Traviata – Ethical Dilemma and Sacrifice**

3. Scene: Violetta and M. Germont (8:51)  
Teresa Stratas (s), Cornell Mac Neil (br), 1982  
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.  
Movie Version, Franco Zeffirelli, dir.  
Universal 20326 (DVD)

### **1853: Il Trovatore – Mystical Bond Between Brothers**

4. “Mal reggendo all'aspro assalto” (3:25)  
Brigitte Fassbaender (ms), Placido Domingo (t) 1984  
Chorus and Orchestra of The Academy of Santa Cecilia, Carlo Maria Giulini, cond.  
Deutsche Grammophon 423 858-2

### **1857: Simon Bocanegra – Father and Daughter**

5. “Dinne, alcun la non vedesti ... Figlia!...a tal nome io palpito” (4:48)  
Giancarlo Pasquetto (br), Elena Prokina (s), 1998  
London Philharmonic Orchestra, Mark Elder, cond.  
Kultur D2043 (DVD Video)

### **1867: Don Carlo – Father Against Son**

6. Duet: King Philip and the Grand Inquisitor (3:15)  
Boris Christoff (b), Giulio Neri (b), 1955  
Orchestra of the Opera Theater of Rome, Gabriele Santini, cond.  
EMI 5 67479 2

**1871: Aida – Dilemma: Homeland or Lover?**

7. “Qui Radames verra! ... O patria mia” (Video) (6:36)  
Aprille Millo, 1989  
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.  
Deutsche Grammophon 440 073 001-9 DVD

**1887: Otello – The Definition of Evil**

8. “Credo in un Dio Crudel” (4:17)  
Sherrill Milnes (br), 1978  
National Philharmonic Orchestra, James Levine, cond.  
RCA Victor Red Seal 74321-39501-2

**1893: Falstaff – “He who laughs last, laughs best”**

9. Final Chorus and Fugue (Video) (6:07)  
Bryn Terfel (br), Barbara Frittoli (s), 1999  
Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Bernard Haitink, cond.  
BBC Opus Arte OA 0823 D (DVD)