



Simon Boccanegra: The Man, the History, the Opera

by Katherine Semcesen

Verdi's opera is actually based on a play by Antonio Garcia Gutierrez however the main character and the actual historical and political events are based on the real first Doge of Genoa. It is an opera that explores personal relationships against a larger back drop of sociology and politics. To truly understand and appreciate the opera, you must consider: the man Simon Boccanegra, and the era the opera was written in and about.

Historical Background of the Opera

By the 13th century Genoa emerged as a powerful city-state. Each city, like Venice, Genoa, and Rome, in what we know today as Italy, functioned like their own countries. Internally, Genoa was overcome with civil unrest between the aristocrats (Patricians) and the commoners (Plebeians). The Patricians controlled the government while the Plebeians were prevented from running for any political positions. In the 14th century, after an uprising the Plebeians took over the authority and created a new head of state called a Doge* as their leader.

Who was Simon Boccanegra?

The real man versus. the operatic character

Though in the opera, Simon was portrayed as coming from humble birth and becoming a corsair**, historically he was born into a relatively powerful Plebian family. He became a businessman prior to being elected the first Doge of Genoa in 1339. He was a man of the people who continuously struggled to keep civil unrest in Genoa from destroying the city, on top of fighting other Italian city-states for the domination of trade routes. The character of Simon in the opera was more successful in achieving this than the real Doge. Simon was poisoned, but not by his future son-in-law Gabriele Adorno as it's told in the opera, but by his enemies, dying at a public banquet in celebration of the King of Cyprus' visit to Genoa in 1363. He was buried in the church of San Francesco in Castelletto in Genoa.

After winning the election that followed Simon's death, Gabriele Adorno, did succeed him as Doge, in the opera and in real life.

As in many art forms, the historical story has been embellished and exaggerated in order to provide more intrigue and drama. What couldn't be found in the history books was left up to creative interpretation of the composer and librettist!

Historical Relevance – Verdi's Lifetime

Verdi began writing operas in the 1830s, during a time of political and social unrest in Italy. His operas were representative of his thoughts on the politics in his country and they grew in popularity since the people shared in his political belief of freedom and equality. During this time, Italy was fragmented by the city-states making it impossible for the Italian people to feel united. Verdi supported the idea of a unified country and he and his music became a part of an unofficial national identity.

Simon Boccanegra is a good example of using art to comment on politics. The politics in the story of *Simon Boccanegra* were very similar to the political situation in Italy in the 1830s. Opera provided an intriguing way for Verdi to comment on Italy's existing situation.

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Doge = The person in charge of setting rules regarding land ownership and governance, the military, and judicial duties in the former republics of Venice and Genoa.

Corsair = A pirate; one who cruises about without authorization from any government, to seize booty on sea or land.