



Verdi's Music

by Eric Domville and Zoë Ludski

Verdi's career spans over 50 years, from *Oberto* in 1839 to *Falstaff* in 1893. In all, he wrote 28 operas, some of which have multiple versions. With such an extensive career, it was inevitable that his music changed considerably, although his work always reveals a strong melodic sense and a powerful rhythmic pulse.

During the 19th century music grew louder as orchestras got bigger and brass instruments, in particular, developed well beyond their previous capacities. The development of musical instruments gave composers more options of sounds, dynamics and note ranges to heighten the emotion and drama in the music. Singers also had to cope with the increased dynamics and extended vocal ranges, however this also provided singers a strong dramatic foundation to create more believable characters.

Throughout Verdi's operas, there are two recurring themes. The first is that of the relationship between fathers and daughters. Undoubtedly this interest stems from the tragic death of his daughter and son as infants. Verdi treats this theme in his operas *Simon Boccanegra*, *Luisa Miller* and *Rigoletto*.

Verdi was also preoccupied with political ideals of a unified Italy during his lifetime. This subject is truly at the core of *Simon Boccanegra* as well as *Don Carlos*. In *Boccanegra*, Simon is elected Doge (ruler) of the city-state of Genoa in 1339. Although he had previously been a pirate in the service of the city, he changes into a statesman and a visionary who longs for peace among the warring regions of Italy. His dream is for the whole of the country to unite and to drive out the foreign occupiers. Verdi and Simon have virtually identical views on this subject.

In Verdi's own lifetime, it was only after the first version of *Simon* that foreign rule finally ended, clearing the way for Italian unification. Verdi

became known as the Composer of the Revolution after performances of his opera *Nabucco*, the theme of which is a nation fighting for freedom. At the first performance the audience caused an uproar after hearing the chorus "Va, pensiero" ("Go, thought"), in which Hebrew slaves in Babylon express their longing for freedom from tyranny. The audience correctly interpreted the Hebrew slaves as the Italian people and the Babylonians as their Austrian oppressors. This chorus remains an unofficial national anthem to this day. Many of Verdi's operas had controversial political overtones, and often times he needed to rewrite sections before they were allowed to be performed. One opera, *Le Roi s'amuse*, was prohibited after the first performance because of derogatory allusions to royalty.

VERDI CHECKLIST
If the music has the following traits, it's probably Verdi.

- Serious topic
- Theme of love: father/daughter, man/country
- Memorable melodies
- Dramatic, emotional music
- Theatrical use of chorus
- Full-sounding orchestra that accompanies the singer and is not overpowering

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