



Verdi's *Nabucco*

In 1840, when Verdi was 27 years old, he was at the lowest point in his life.

While still a boy, Verdi had left his home in the small hamlet of Le Roncole to study in the nearby town of Busseto in the Duchy of Parma. Here he demonstrated his musical talents and when he turned 18, he moved into the home of Antonio Barezzi, an affluent merchant and patron of the arts who became his patron and champion. Barezzi's influence helped Verdi get started as a musician and composer. Then Verdi fell in love with and married Barezzi's daughter, Margherita. The couple had two children, a girl, Virginia and a boy, Icilio.

In 1839, Verdi, then 26, and his wife and infant son, Icilio, left their home in Busseto and moved to Milan. (Their infant daughter, Virginia, had died the year before.) While still in Busseto, Verdi had written his first opera, *Oberto, Count of Saint Boniface*, with a libretto by Temistocle Solera, who was also Verdi's fellow supporter of Italian unification. Bartolomeo Merelli, Director of La Scala in Milan, arranged to have *Oberto* produced there, a considerable achievement for a young composer. It was a moderate success, and on the strength of that, Merelli offered Verdi a commission for three additional operas. Verdi's next attempt, his second opera, was a comedy, *Un giorno di regno*, (usually translated as *King For a Day*), with a libretto by a successful and well-known librettist Felice Romani. But as he worked on that opera, first Icilio, then Margherita died. And then, *Un Giorno di regno* was a complete flop – it was booed at its premiere in September of 1840 and further performances were canceled.

Verdi was passionate about three things: his wife and children, opera, and Italian unification. In 1840, he lost his family, failed at opera (he thought) and unification was still 25 years away. Crushed, the young man decided he would return to Busseto and never compose again.

But Merelli was convinced of Verdi's talent and did what he could to change his mind. Merelli gave Verdi the libretto of *Nabucco*, also written by Solera, and asked him to look at it.

In an account from his later years, Verdi described how he took it back to his rooms and angrily threw it on the floor; it fell open to the page with the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves. Curious, he read it and was immediately transported. In other memoirs he recollected slightly differently. Over many decades, his memory of a painful period in his life was understandably less than acute. But one thing is clear: He was deeply affected by the drama and the metaphoric power of the Chorus and of the entire libretto. He, like the librettist, saw the plight of the Hebrew exiles in Babylon as a metaphor for the plight of the Italian people, their own land occupied by foreign powers, and their yearning for freedom and independence. Inspired, he set to work on the opera and it was premiered on March 9, 1842 at La Scala.

In *Verdi With a Vengeance*, scholar William Berger describes the premiere as "one of the great sensations of theatrical history." The audience applauded the opening scene for ten minutes. In Act II, their excitement

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only increased and the Chorus had to be encored – something hitherto unheard of at La Scala. To this day, the Chorus is encored in most Italian opera houses and in this country it is encored at the Met as well.

Nabucco received only eight more performances that first season because it was presented near its end, but in the following year it was performed 60 times – wildly cheered each time. It was a brilliant success that made Verdi's reputation as a composer, and equally importantly, gave him the confidence to continue.

In addition to being a highlight of the opera, the Chorus became an anthem for the Risorgimento – the movement that culminated in Italian unification and independence. At Verdi's funeral in 1901, the crowds along the procession sang it. To this day, it remains the “second National Anthem” of Italy, (much as *America the Beautiful* is in this country).

From the time of *Nabucco*, Verdi produced one brilliant success after another. He composed a total of 30 operas, the last being *Falstaff* (his only comedy after the ill-fated *Giorno di regno*), which premiered in 1893 when Verdi was 80 years old.

Nabucco had yet another significance in Verdi's life. Although he never really recovered from the deaths of Margherita and their two children, he did manage to find love once again. The soprano who sang Abigail was named Giuseppina Strepponi. Their professional relationship had begun when she sang the lead in Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*. Then, after *Nabucco*, their relationship blossomed; by 1846 they had become lovers and eventually married in 1859. The relationship would last for over 50 years, until Giuseppina's death in 1897.

And so, between his tragic year of 1840 and his triumph of 1842, Verdi found his voice. In a 1979 article in the magazine *New Republic*, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote:

Noble, simple, with a degree of unbroken vitality and vast natural power of creation and organization, Verdi is the voice of a world that is no more. His enormous popularity among the most sophisticated as well as the most ordinary listeners today is due to the fact that he expressed permanent states of consciousness in the most direct terms: as Homer, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Tolstoy have done... After Verdi this is not heard in music again.

Thanks to the visionary encouragement of Bartolomeo Merelli, that was the voice that Verdi found through the pain of his two years of crisis. For this, let us always be grateful.

Art Axelrod, for the Opera Guild of Rochester