



*VERDI'S NABUCCO
and the
Italian Risorgimento*

Rosalba Pisaturo

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Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

NABUCCO

Dramma lirico in four parts
Libretto by Temistocle Solera

Premiere: Teatro La Scala, Milano
March 9, 1842

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus
Conductor James Levine

2002, DVD: DG Cat. B0003850-09

CAST:

Nabucco

King of Babylon

Juan Pons

Ismaele

nephew of the king of Jerusalem

Gwyn Hughes Jones

Zaccaria

High Priest of the Hebrews

Samuel Ramey

Abigaille

a slave, believed to be Nabucco's eldest daughter

Maria Guleghina

Fenena

Nabucco's daughter

Wendy White

The High Priest of Baal

Stephen Morscheck

Abdallo,

an elderly officer

Rafael Suarez

Anna

Zaccaria's sister

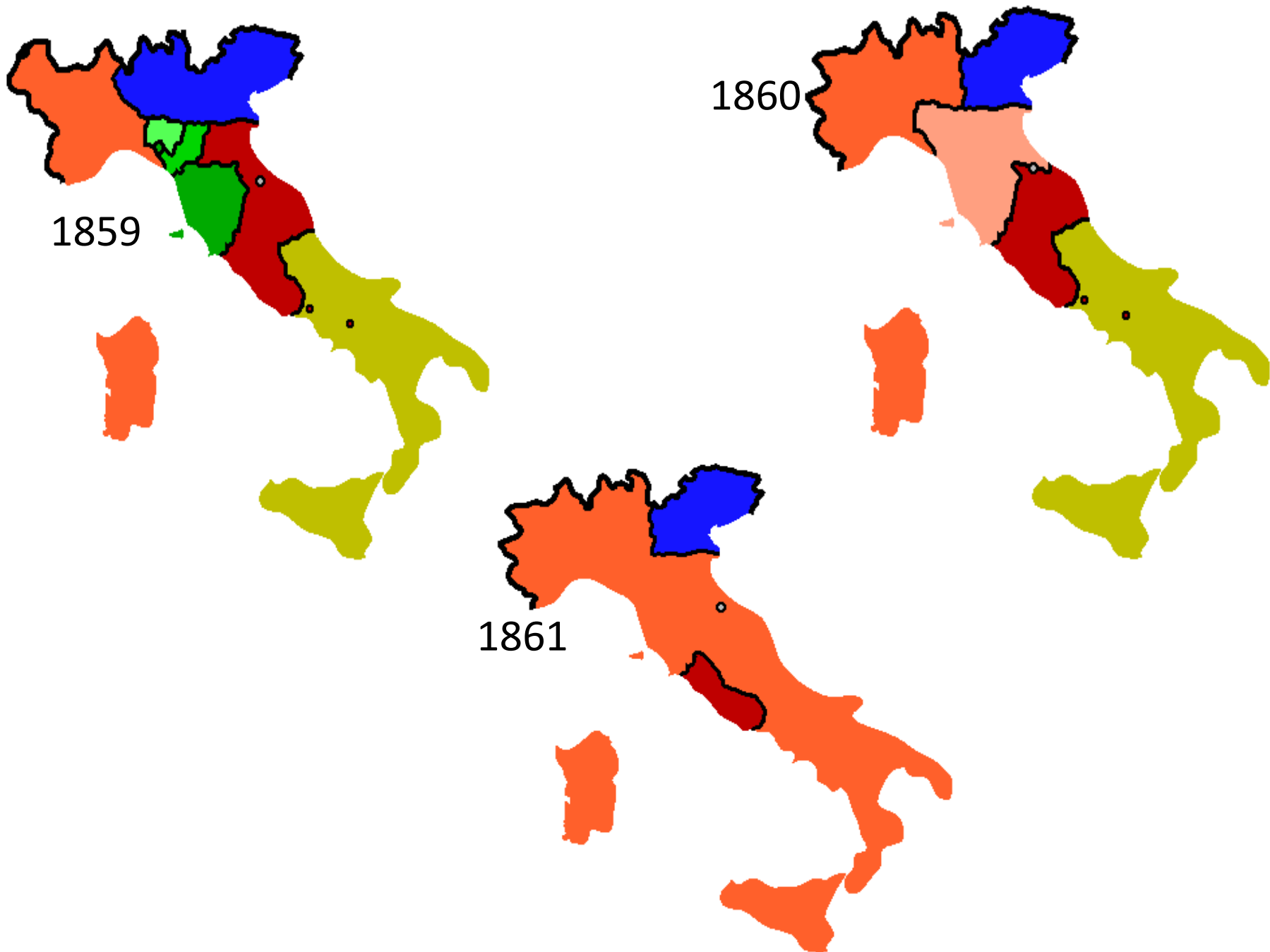
Alexandra Deshorties

- 1.** Verdi as the most important artist and emblematic figure of the Risorgimento, intended as the political rebirth of the Italian nation.
- 2.** 1848-1861, the political situation of Italy and the three major wars of Independence.
- 3.** The conception of *Nabucco*.
- 4.** Synopsis of the opera and selections of arias.

1810-1840

Italy was divided in three major parts under the Austrians, the Spaniards and the French dominations





In the 1840s and in the 1850s the language spoken in Italy was a language of freedom and unification. It was a nationalistic language that ceased to speak of personal and civic identity in terms of city and region, but sought instead to speak of Italians and Italy as one. Ideas of defending the country and expelling foreign oppressors was central in the minds of the young intellectuals and artists whose works led to political activism aimed at creating a unified Italy.

The great political activist Giuseppe Mazzini believed that music in particular was the existing “universal language of the nation” and a powerful vehicle to the

notion of Risorgimento. No musician better embodied Mazzini's ideals than Giuseppe Verdi.

Born in 1813 into a family of relatively modest means in a small village near the Duchy of Parma, Verdi became rich because of his music, but it was also his music that propelled him into that national consciousness of independence and made him a national icon of the Risorgimento. He strongly believed that Italy had to be free and unified as a monarchy under the king Victor

Emanuel II. Even his name became a rallying cry for unification when in 1858 "Viva Verdi!" was shouted and

graphitized on the walls of Turin, Milan, Rome and Naples.

The acrostic
“VIVA Verdi”

VIVA

Vittorio

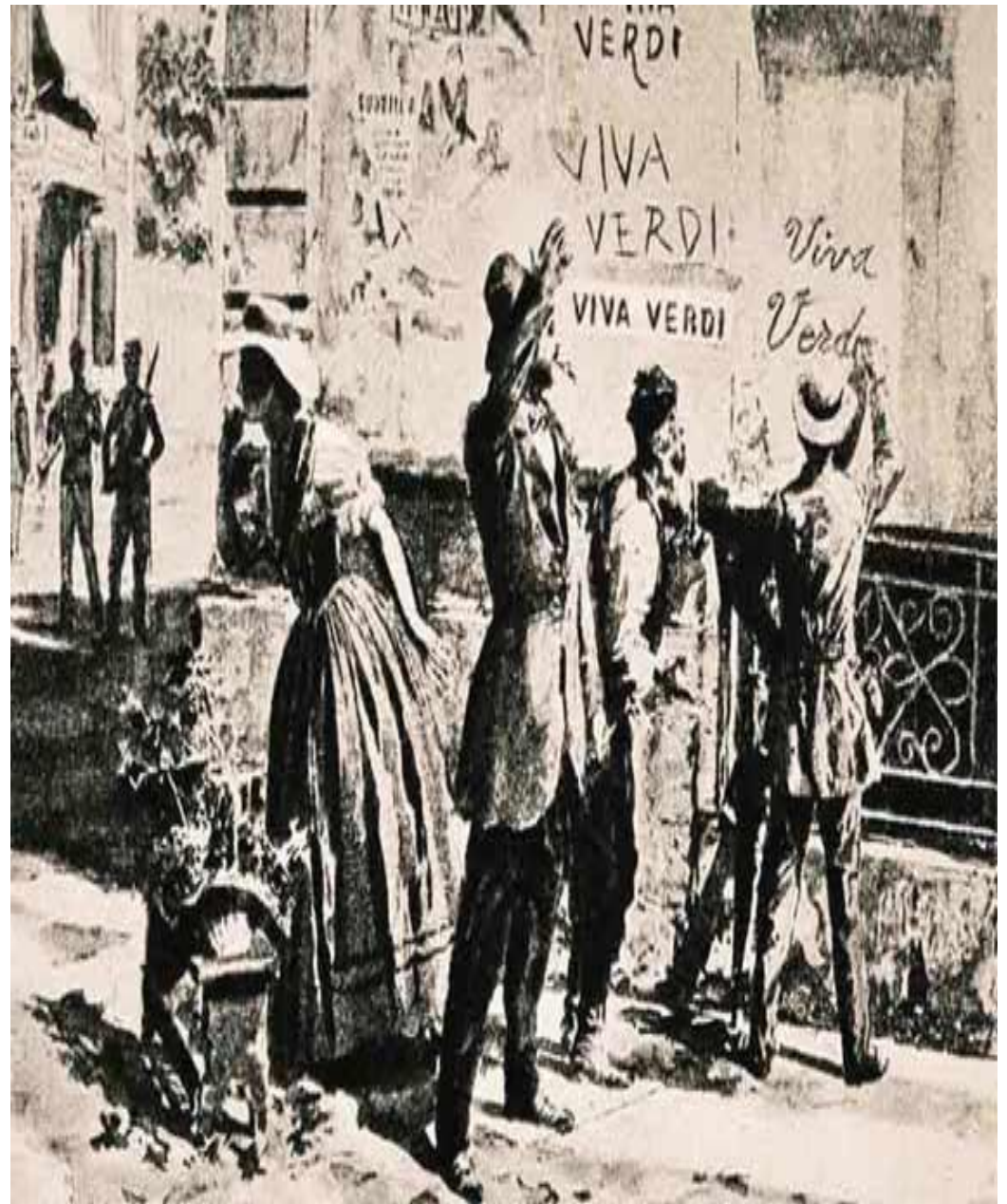
Emanuele

Re

Di

Italia

Began in Naples in 1858 and
it spread through the country



The phrase represented a plea to unite under a king whose name formed the acrostic **V**ittorio **E**manuele **R**e **D**i **I**talia. As far as his active involvement in the Italian political arena, in 1859 Verdi was elected and sent to Turin to seek the unification with the Kingdom of Piedmont. In 1861, at the request of Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour, the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Savoy, Verdi was invited to be a deputy of the first national Parliament and the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy, he was later appointed by the king as a senator of the Kingdom of Italy, a lifelong title.

In the 1840s we see a simultaneous rise of Giuseppe Verdi and of that national Italian sentiment of independence. He became a cultural and artistic symbol of the movement, called Risorgimento, alongside Mazzini, Manzoni, Garibaldi, Mameli, and others. Ultimately, Verdi's success came through his ability to express the yearning that he shared with the Italian people for a united country, free of the oppressive foreign presence of outside powers. All of Verdi's life and works are evidence of his love for Italy and his unique and important role in the Risorgimento, as he gave a voice to the soul of the Italian people.

By 1901, when he died at 88, after having composed 28 operas, Verdi had witnessed major changes in the structure and philosophy of opera in Europe.

During his lifetime, between 1813 to 1901, Beethoven died in 1827, Bellini died in 1835, Donizetti died 1848, Rossini died in 1868, Wagner died in 1883. Puccini was born 1858, and Leoncavallo was born in 1857 and Mascagni was born in 1863.

Verdi dominated the musical panorama of whole 19th century with an arc of profession and perfection almost impossible to find in the development of any other opera composer.

When Verdi died in Milano in January 1901, all of Italy wept as one. Almost a quarter million people (more than half the city's population) in a solemn procession marched to '*Va pensiero*' - better known as the *Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves* - from *Nabucco*, sung by a massed choir under the baton of the celebrated maestro Arturo Toscanini. And the reason the Italians took the streets that cold winter day of 1901 was about much more than just music. Starting with *Nabucco* in 1842, Verdi's operas had provided the soundtrack to the politically tempestuous half-century that preceded his death, and his most famous arias had become almost anthems for a nation recently unified.

No doubt that artistically *Nabucco* is Verdi's first operatic triumph for its wonderful music, and that it established his reputation as a great composer, but politically *Nabucco* played a bigger role in a country which was looking for its independence from foreign domination. At a time when opera in Italy had become the most important form of cultural activity, Verdi's *Nabucco* inspired the masses with national sentiment and patriotic spirit. It became the artistic symbol of the Risorgimento as it established a long relationship between the composer and Italy's political aspirations and social achievements. The libretto of *Nabucco* is based on biblical stories from the book of Jeremiah and the Book of Daniel, dating back to 587 B.C.

It follows the plot of the Jews as they are assaulted, conquered and exiled from their homeland by the Babylonian King Nabucco. On its surface, the opera deals with the epic struggle of the High Priest Zaccaria and the Jews suppressed by Nabucco and his vengeful daughter, Abigaille. But to the Italians at the dawn of their fighting for their freedom from Austria, Verdi's opera became an inspiring call to arms, as it captured the voice of all exiles and it touched the heart of anyone yearning for their homeland. The *Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves*, as a melancholy memory of the lost homeland, became the primary vehicle of national unification.

In 1840, after the failure of his second opera *Un giorno di regno*, written during the mourning of the death of his wife and their two children, Verdi had decided never to compose again. In 1879, 39 years later, in his “Autobiographical Sketch” Verdi tells the story of a libretto Temistocle Solera had given him to read and to write an opera. Verdi describes how he took it home, and “I threw the manuscript with a violent gesture on the table and stood rigid before it. The libretto, falling on the table, opened itself and without my quite realizing it my eyes fixed on the page before me at one particular line: ‘*Va, pensiero sull’ali dorate*’ (*Fly, thought, on golden wings*)...I was deeply moved.”

Those words inspired the composer to gradually work on the music and in 1841 *Nabucco* was completed. By opening night the opera was a great success, and in spite of police prohibition against encores because they could initiate demonstrations against the Austrians, the audience insisted that the chorus '*Va, pensiero*' from the third act should be sung again. To this day, the "miracle" of the libretto gives a comforting story of the enduring power of music. While on stage the Chorus was giving voice to the Hebrew slaves lamenting the loss of their homeland, in reality the slaves were engaging in a secret dialogue with the audience. Their gentle nostalgia became the ideal vehicle for fond memories of earlier times of action and heroism.

When *Nabucco* premiered at La Scala in 1842, Italy was simply a cluster of geographical kingdoms and principalities with little more to unite them than a common language. The Risorgimento, as this manifestation of nationalism, aimed to unite this country which had been under foreign dominations since the fall of the Roman Empire and to make it independent under one flag and one government. For many Italians, however, Risorgimento meant more than political unity. It was also a movement for the renewal of Italian society with constitutional guarantees of personal liberty and rights.

PART I (Chap. 4) In the temple of Salomon the Hebrews pray for protection from the Babylonians who, led by their king Nabucco, are about to attack Jerulasem. Zaccaria, the High priest of the Hebrews, is holding hostage Fenena, Nabucco's daughter and encourages his people to put their trust in God's help. *"Sperate, o figli!..."*

(Chap.6) Ismaele, nephew of the Hebrew king, is in love with Fenena and as he tries to free her, their flight is interrupted by Babylonian soldiers led by Abigaille, believed to be Nabucco's oldest daughter, who is also in love with Ismaele. *"Fenena! O mia diletta!"*

Abigaille has confronted the two lovers and she has offered to save the Hebrews if Ismaele will return her love, but he refuses.

(Chap. 11 & 12) Nabucco arrives to the temple and is stopped by Zaccaria, who is threatening to kill his daughter Fenena. Just as the the priest raises his dagger against Fenena, Ismaele saves her. As Nabucco takes her in his arms, he gives orders to burn the temple, while Abigaille vows to wipe the Hebrew people off the face of the earth. Zaccaria and the Jews curse Ismaele who has betrayed his people. *“Tremin gl’insani...”*
“Mio furore....”

PART II (Chap. 13 & 15) In the royal palace of Babylon Abigaille has found a document revealing that she is not the king’s daughter, but a child of slaves. She gets enraged against Nabucco and her wrath has no limits nor does her desire for vengeance against Fenena, who is now her rival in love and for the throne of Babylonia.

Soon the High Priest of Baal comes to report that Fenena is freeing the Hebrews. Rumors are spread that Nabucco has fallen in battle and Abigaille decides to regain power in ascending to the throne. *“Ben io t’invenni”* *“Salgo gia’ del....”*

(Chap. 20 & 22) Ismaele, accused of treachery, has been pardoned; Fenena has been converted to the Jewish faith, but her life is in danger because Nabucco is believed dead and the Babylonians have proclaimed Abigaille the ruler. But to the astonishment of all, Nabucco arrives and commands everyone to worship him as their king and the only god. For this blasphemy a thunderbolt strikes him down, the crown falls from his head and like a madman he asks: “ Who is taking the royal crown from me?” Abigaille now crowns herself.

“S’apressan gli istanti”

“Chi mi toglie il reggio scettro?”

PART III (Chap. 24 & 26) Abigaille is asked to sign a decree of death for Fenena, but as the disheveled Nabucco wanders, she tricks him into signing it himself. Nabucco realizes that he has ordered the death of his daughter and tries to find the document proving Abigaille's lowly birth. As Abigaile is in possess of the document, she tears it to pieces and orders the guards to imprison Nabucco, as he pleads for Fenena's life.

"Eccelsa donna"

"Oh, di quant'onta aggravasi"

(Chap. 28) On the Banks of the river Euphrates, resting from their forced labor, the Hebrews sing a nostalgic lament for their lost native land. This is the famous chorus, "*Va, pensiero sull'ali dorate,*" 9 and ½ minutes of the most dignified piece of music ever written. Sung with natural, crisp and sonorous precision, the Chorus becomes the perfect expression of a people longing for freedom. Rossini observed that this Chorus is not a true Chorus, but it is really an aria sung by massed voices. He commented that, except for a few notes where they divide, all the voices sing the tune, and the tune does not pass from voice to voice and get out of man's range; anyone could sing it all.

The line “Oh mia patria sì bella e perduta!” (“Oh my country so beautiful and lost”) – are the few very simple nostalgic words which embraced the whole audience with a spirit of patriotic action and nationalistic fervor in 1842.

In 2011, on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Unification of Italy, a special performance of *Nabucco*, conducted by Riccardo Muti, was staged in Rome. When it came to the Chorus, Muti asked the audience to sing along, 80% of the audience, all on their feet, knew every word of the chorus. This is because to this day many Italians believe that “*Va, pensiero*” is the Italian national anthem. In a country that cried out “*Viva Verdi*” over 150 years ago his operas still stand as cultural monuments.

Va, pensiero

Chorus of Hebrew Slaves from Verdi' *Nabucco*

Italian

Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate;
va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli,
ove olezzano tepide e molli
l'aure dolci del suolo natal!

Del Giordano le rive saluta,
di Sionne le torri atterrate...
O, mia patria, sì bella e perduta!
O, memoria, sì cara e fatale!

Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati,
perché muta dal salice pendi?
Le memorie nel petto raccendi,
ci favella del tempo che fu!

O simile di Sòlima ai fati
traggi un suono di crudo lamento,
o t'ispiri il Signore un concerto
che ne infonda al patire virtù.

Translation in English

Fly, thought, on wings of gold;
go settle upon the slopes and the hills,
where, soft and mild, the sweet airs
of our native land smell fragrant!

Greet the banks of the Jordan
and Zion's toppled towers...
Oh, my country, so beautiful and lost!
Oh, remembrance, so dear and so fatal!

Golden harp of the prophetic seers,
why dost thou hang mute upon the willow?
Rekindle our bosom's memories,
and speak to us of times gone by!

Mindful of the fate of Jerusalem,
give forth a sound of crude lamentation,
or may the Lord inspire you a harmony of voices
which may instill virtue to suffering.

(Chap. 31, 32, 33) Nabucco, awakening from a nightmare grasps the reality of being a prisoner in his own palace. Turning in prayer to the Hebrew God begs forgiveness and promises to rebuilt the temple. He rushes off to save Fenena.

“Son pur queste...”

“Dio di Giuda!”

“Cadran, cadranno i perfidi...”

(Chap. 38) Nabucco has freed the Hebrews to return to their own country and as he worships the Lord, Abigaille, who has poisoned herself, enters asking forgiveness and invoking the God of the Hebrews while she is dying.

“Oh! chi vegg’io....”

References

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