



IAGO: Portrait of Deception

Verdi, while considering the idea of composing *Otello*, requested his artist friend, Domenico Morelli, to paint the character Iago. Verdi described him thus: “a scoundrel with the face of an honest man.” Verdi’s conception was that if Iago did not appear charming and open, he would never be able to deceive so effectively. The following direction was given in the *Otello* Production Book, prepared by the librettist, Arrigo Boito, under Verdi’s supervision:

The greatest error, the most vulgar error an artist interpreting the character could commit, would be to represent him as a kind of human demon, to put a Mephistophelian sneer on his face, and to give him Satanic eyes....He must be handsome and appear jovial and good-natured...

- - Both quotes from Verdi’s Shakespeare, Wills, Gary, Viking, NY, NY, 2011

But how to convey Iago’s true nature, if the actor is to not to appear malevolent?

Shakespeare handled this dramatic task by giving Iago many soliloquies and asides, so the audience is frequently reminded that, however honest and well-intentioned he seems, his vile schemes are constantly afoot. These techniques are problematic in an opera, however; arias are fewer at this stage of Verdi’s career, and although there are asides in the opera, having too many soliloquies is musically cumbersome; each must be prepared for, and the flow of the drama interrupted.

In the opera, Boito began by giving Iago a few lines during the turbulence of the storm in the first scene: “Let the ...sea be his [Otello’s] grave!” and to Roderigo, “Though I pretend to love him, I hate that Moor...” We learn that Iago bears malice for Otello and that he is deceptive. Then, Boito came up with the idea of Iago’s “Credo.” In Act II, it is one of only two times the villain is alone on the stage (the other being the end of Act III, when he plants his foot on Otello’s fallen body after the fit.)

When Boito delivered the final version of the “Credo” text, Verdi declared it “Shakespearean in every way.” Since there is no such speech in the play, what did he mean? The piece contains the essence of all those soliloquies in the play, and reveals the nature of Iago’s evil mind. His is a nihilistic creed, in which he is not rebelling against God, but is evil because God is evil. Not only does it reveal Iago’s thoughts, but, in the words of Gary Wills, “it is a savage satire on the ecclesiastical creed as set by endless musicians... and it is laid out in the same series of ‘I

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believes.” Later, neither Verdi, who had Christian values but was essentially a nonbeliever and very anti-clerical, nor Boito wanted the credit. Verdi was composing an *Ave Maria*, when Boito said, “Plenty of Ave Marias will be needed for the Holy See to forgive you Jago’s *Credo*.” Verdi replied, “You’re the main culprit who needs to be forgiven for Jago’s *Credo*.” (Wills, p.143-146.)

As for the staging of the opera, Verdi, as usual, had his hand in all aspects of the new production; in fact, he had now reached such a pinnacle of fame, reverence, and popularity, that his authority over these matters was virtually absolute. He had identified the singer to play Iago during the production of the revised *Simon Boccanegra*, which had been his and Boito’s previous project. Victor Maurel was a highly-educated and cultured French baritone, who had decided to concentrate his career in Italy and was renowned for his dramatic subtlety. Verdi was also impressed with his Italian diction, for he felt that clarity of delivery was crucial to the effective portrayal of Iago’s character. He was directed to play Iago as described above. As for the “*Credo*,” although it has often in performance ended with a demonic laugh, Verdi and Boito had this to say, “At his final words, ‘*E vecchia fola il Ciel*’ [Heaven is an old fairy tale] he should shrug his shoulders then, turning, walk upstage.” (Wills, p.144.)

Though Maurel was known to have his own ideas, he evidently portrayed Iago as directed, at least in the initial performances. The reviewer for the *Times* of London wrote the following:

As an actor he realized the character of the plausible villain with a distinctness seldom witnessed even in the spoken drama. He was honest Iago all over, soft-spoken, and looking most innocent when he aimed the most poisonous shafts at the defenseless breast of the Moor. (Wills, p. 117.)

The “*Credo*” was delivered with a “defiantly full voice,” and gained greatly in impact from its contrast with the “softer, more insinuating delivery of the other lines.”

As noted, Verdi, the “Bear of Busseto,” had complete control over the production –and he has been credited with being largely responsible for a revolution in Italian acting; he spent much time cajoling and bullying singers into his view of the matter, sometimes demonstrating the desired physical attitudes and actions himself. As Wills puts it:

Verdi’s thorough, almost fanatically detailed preparations-for the libretto, the score, the rehearsals, the orchestra, and the singers-raised the professional level of Italian opera, and prepared the way for the scintillating later triumph of *Falstaff*. (Wills, p. 122)

- Carol Crocca, for the Opera Guild of Rochester