

Verdi

A talk to be delivered at Dorothea's House, January 6,
2013

Sandy Steiglitz

When Linda Prospero asked me to speak about Verdi, since the 200th anniversary of his birth is coming up next October, I was delighted. Verdi played a large role in my interest in and love of opera. I grew up in a small town in New York State, and there were no opportunities to see an opera on stage. In our house, we had the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts on the radio on Saturday afternoons, and some old records. Then, my mother learned about the Triple Cities Opera Company, and I got to see my first opera. It was Verdi's *La Traviata*, and I was hooked. Verdi lived a long, interesting, and sometimes tragic life, wrote an enormous amount of music (not only opera), and today we will only have time to sketch his life and sample some of my favorite short examples of his work, performed by some of my favorite singers.

Giuseppe Verdi was born in Le Roncole in Parma, on October 10, 1813. He was a musically gifted little boy, and at the age of seven, he was already helping the local church organist. The organist at the church in nearby Busseto took him on as a student when he was 12 years old, and he became the organist's assistant when he was 16. Verdi had several music teachers, and he became the town music master in 1836, when he was only 23 years old. He was also married that year, to Margherita Barezzi, who was the daughter of one of his patrons. Verdi wrote his first opera, *Oberto*, three years later, in 1839. It was well received, and there were requests for more operas.

Verdi's second opera, *Un Giorno di Regno*, was produced in 1840, and it was a flop. But even before that, there were tragedies in Verdi's life. Their daughter, Virginia, who was born in March of 1837, died the next year. Their son, Icilio, who was born in July of 1838, died in October of 1839. To add to this indescribable

misery, Verdi's wife Margherita died on June 18, 1840. Verdi was depressed and ready to give up composing, but the manager at La Scala wouldn't hear of it and encouraged Verdi to write his next opera, Nabucco. Nabucco tells the story of the Jews, who have been conquered and driven from their homeland by King Nebuchadnezzar. The first performance was at La Scala in Milan on March 9, 1842. Nabucco was the opera that made Verdi famous. The "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves", "Va, pensiero", is sung in Act 3. It was an instant sensation and was later adopted as an anthem for Italian patriots. Here it is, in a recording from 1965, with the Vienna State Opera Chorus and Orchestra, led by Lamberto Gardelli.

PLAY "Va, Pensiero" Viva Verdi cd cd1 #3 (5)

Verdi wrote a number of operas rather quickly, and he called this period of his life his "years in the galleys". Operas composed during this time include "Ernani", "Attila", "Macbeth", and several others. I want to include music from Verdi's fourth opera, "I Lombardi", a story about the first Crusade, because it's an example of his talent for writing wonderful melodies with flowing lines. This is "La mia letizia infondere", from Act 2. It's only $2\frac{1}{2}$ minutes long, but I think it's a perfect tenor aria. This is Franco Corelli in a recording from 1955.

PLAY "La mia letizia infondere" Corelli Gala cd #1 ($2\frac{1}{2}$)

Attila, a story about Attila the Hun, was another of the "galley years" operas, and it was first produced in 1846. That was 3 years after I Lombardi. This is Ezio's aria from Act 2— E' gettata la mia sorte, sung by Sherrill Milnes in a 1972 recording.

PLAY "E' gettata" red Viva Verdi cd cd1 #9 ($2\frac{1}{2}$)

Verdi often had problems with the censors, and this was still true when he wrote his three Middle Period operas: "Rigoletto", "Il Trovatore", and "La Traviata". "Rigoletto" was based on Victor Hugo's play, "Le Roi S'Amuse", and it depicts rape, criticism of royalty, and other distasteful subjects. Verdi was forced to

change King Francis I into a Duke, and the title, the setting, and names of the characters were also changed. The title of the opera was originally “La maledizione”—or “The Curse”. “Rigoletto” was first performed in Venice in 1851 when Verdi was 38 years old. Here is an exquisite short aria from “Rigoletto”. The Duke sings this when the opera opens. This is Tito Schipa singing “Questa 0 quella”, recorded in 1926.

PLAY “Questa 0 quella” Tito Schipa Grandi Voci #8 (2)

If you ask someone how many operas Verdi wrote, you will receive a number of answers. Some will say 25, some, 26, and some will answer 28. A lot of that has to do with the censors. For example, “Stiffelio” was produced the year before “Rigoletto” in 1850. He is a minister, who went away on a mission, and while he was gone, his wife was seduced by a scoundrel. At the end of the opera, Stiffelio forgives her during a church service. The censors were scandalized by this story and poor Verdi had to withdraw the opera. BUT—he revised it and renamed it “Aroldo”. In “Aroldo”, the main character is no longer a minister. He is a Saxon Knight. “Aroldo” was first performed in Rimini in 1857. The censors also had a problem with “La Traviata”. They didn’t care for the idea of an opera about a courtesan, and they also felt that the aria “Libiamo” was a little too racy. They had other complaints, but Verdi had his way with a lot of their criticism. Here is a duet from Act 1 of “La Traviata” ... “Un di, felice, eterea”. Violetta is Dame Joan Sutherland, and Alfredo is Carlo Bergonzi.

PLAY “Un di, felice” London Famous Operatic Duets #1 (3½)

“Un Ballo in Maschera” also presented problems for Verdi. He had received a commission from the San Carlo Opera in Naples, and the story he wanted to use concerned the assassination of a king. The censors would not allow this, and Verdi postponed the opera for Naples and decided to offer it to a theatre in Rome. They, too, were unhappy about the plot, so Verdi changed the setting from Sweden to New England. The main character would no longer be a king. Now, he was the governor of Boston. The original names of the characters were also changed, of course, and King Gustavus became Riccardo, and his secretary, Anckarström, became Renato. It was first performed in 1859. By the way, the

name of the opera was also changed. It was originally *Una Vendetta*. Here is the king's or governor's aria from Act. 1. Jussi Bjoerling sings "Di' tu se fedele" in a recording from 1944.

PLAY "Di'tu se fedele" EMI Bjoerling cd #9 (3)

You may wonder about Verdi's personal life after he lost his wife and two children at such an early age. He met soprano Giuseppina Strepponi when she sang the role of Abigaille in *Nabucco*. They became romantically involved around 1847, about 5 years after they met. When they started living together, it caused quite a scandal, but they did marry in 1859. Verdi was 46 years old, and she was two years younger. They had a very happy marriage, and they shared their lives until her death in 1897. They were together for 50 years.

The first performance of the Verdi "Requiem" was at San Marco in Milan on May 22, 1874. It was written in memory of Alessandro Manzoni, an Italian poet and writer, who was admired greatly by Verdi. The first performance coincided with the first anniversary of Manzoni's death. Many have called the "Requiem" Verdi's "greatest opera", and it IS quite operatic and absolutely gorgeous from beginning to end. This is the *Ingemisco*, performed with the Orchestra at La Scala, Riccardo Muti conducting, with Luciano Pavarotti.

PLAY "Ingemisco" Verdi Requiem cd1 #9 (4)

Verdi wrote "Don Carlo" for the Paris Opera. The first performance was on March 11, 1867. Based on a drama by Friedrich Schiller, the opera is in 5 acts, and it was said that it was too long for the Italian public. Verdi worked on it for about 20 years, during which it was revised for La Scala and presented there in 1884. "Don Carlo" is a difficult opera to produce because it requires 6 exceptional singers. An aria that I especially love from *Don Carlo* occurs in Act 2. Princess Eboli is Elisabetta's lady-in-waiting, and she sings *The Song of the Veil* about a Moorish King who is bored with his wife and woos a mysterious veiled woman, only to discover that she is his wife. This is Shirley Verrett with Delia Wallis as the page Tebaldo, with the Ambrosian Opera Chorus and Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. The conductor is Carlo Maria Giulini.

PLAY “Song of the Veil” Met Stars Sing Verdi cd2 #15 (5)

Verdi’s last opera was “Falstaff”, first performed at La Scala on February 9, 1893. Verdi was nearly 80 years old. He had always wanted to write another comedy, but the specter of “Un Giorno di Regno”, his failed second opera, haunted him. Falstaff was Verdi’s third opera to be based on a play of Shakespeare, the other two being Macbeth and Otello. Verdi’s librettist, Arrigo Boito, based Falstaff on “The Merry Wives of Windsor” and “Henry IV”. It was a huge success. Here is an aria that I love from the last act of Falstaff. It takes place in Windsor Park, and Nannetta is dressed as the Fairy Queen. This is Anna Moffo in a 1956 recording with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus, led by Herbert von Karajan.

PLAY “Sul fil d’un soffio etesio” Met Legends–Moffo #7 (4)

Verdi was an inspiring and generous man. In 1888, when he was 75 years old, he built a hospital near his estate. The following year, he decided to build a home for retired opera singers and musicians who were having financial troubles. He called it “Casa di Riposo”, and it was built on a piece of land that he purchased in Milan. Construction was completed in 1899 and after his death, it was funded by the royalties from his operas. Verdi passed away in Milan on January 27, 1901 at the age of 87. He had requested a simple funeral with no music, although this became a national day of mourning. After a month, the coffins of Verdi and his wife, Giuseppina, were moved to a crypt at Casa di Riposo. At this ceremony, members of the Italian Royal Family, many diplomats and dignitaries and composers were in attendance. Arturo Toscanini led the La Scala chorus in the popular chorus from Nabucco, “Va, Pensiero”. A crowd of many thousands of people viewed the ceremony and burst into song as well.

Thank you.