

PREGHIERA SCENES IN ITALIAN *BEL CANTO* OPERA

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Abstract

This lecture explores the representation of prayer in opera during the *bel canto* era. During the operatic *bel canto* era, prayer scenes were featured with increasing frequency. The popularity of this practice was likely rooted in a Romantic trend towards utilizing religious ceremony for dramatic effect. Eventually, these scenes became a standard part of Romantic Italian opera in a variety of forms, but none so prevalent as the heroine's pleading. As the era developed, the language for referencing a religious figure used in prayers, the musical structure, the orchestration, and the way composers and librettists utilized these scenes within the dramatic context of the opera all changed and moved towards the grand *preghiera* scenes of Giuseppe Verdi. The scenes examined are: Gioachino Rossini's "Deh, tu reggi in tal momento" from *La gazza ladra*, Gaetano Donizetti's "Deh, tu di un'umile preghiera" from *Maria Stuarda*, "Madre pietosa Vergine" from Giuseppe Verdi's *La forza del destino*, "Deh calma o ciel" from Rossini's *Otello*, and Verdi's "Ave Maria" also from *Otello*. A detailed study of the scenes and arias above exemplifies how the politics, tastes, and sensibilities of the Italian people changed.

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Introduction

This paper will explore the representation of prayer in opera during the *bel canto* era. *Bel canto* translates as “beautiful singing” and the time line of the exact historical era is not universally agreed upon by scholars, but generally includes the Italian operas of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, their contemporaries, and sometimes early Verdi. During the operatic *bel canto* era, prayer (or in Italian *preghiera*) scenes were featured with increasing frequency.

Eventually, these scenes became a standard part of Romantic Italian opera in a variety of forms, but none so prevalent as the heroine's pleading. The popularity of this practice was likely rooted in a Romantic trend towards utilizing religious ceremony for dramatic effect. There are precedents in earlier operas for including prayers as part of the dramatic action, and this was often seen in French opera immediately preceding the Italian *bel canto* era. In these French operas, characters are praying to a god of the Roman pantheon or some other deity and not the Judeo-Christian God. One of the most prominent composers of the *bel canto* era, Gioachino Rossini, often includes prayers in his operas for the hero/heroine or for the chorus in his more serious operas. As the era developed, the language for referencing a religious figure used in prayers, the musical structure, the orchestration, and the way composers and librettists utilized these scenes within the dramatic context of the opera, all changed and moved towards the grand *preghiera* scenes of Giuseppe Verdi. These changes were motivated by the musical developments of the period as well as the many social and political shifts that occurred.

Precursors

In order to properly understand the significance of the reshaping of prayer's role in opera, it is necessary to be aware of the history of the previous era as well as the political, musical, and social matters that affected the way opera was composed and performed. Opera in Italy during the early nineteenth century enjoyed great success despite a tumultuous political climate. The invasion of Napoleon and his troops marked the end of many years of peace in Italy. Napoleon ruled Italy for eighteen years from 1796 to 1814. When he was defeated and sent into exile, the Congress of Vienna reestablished royal rule, which was referred to as the Restoration, in Italy. At this time, the Austrians were given substantial parts of northern Italy and Tuscany, and the Bourbon monarchy was restored to Naples. There was peace, though a somewhat oppressive peace, in Italy until 1848 when another set of revolutions on the Continent gave Italy an opportunity to regain some control from the Austrians. The Italian unification or *Risorgimento* took another twenty years to accomplish, but Italy was finally united under the King of Sardinia, Vittorio Emanuele II in 1870.

During the period leading up to the 1848 revolutions and the *Risorgimento*, the political and economic climate in Italy was unstable. As a result of those pressures, opera theaters underwent many changes of internal structure. The theaters had historically been mostly associated with royal courts, but after the Napoleonic period the number of non-royal theaters multiplied. Opera houses, even those that were privately owned, were subsidized by some level of tax revenue and subject to many regulations. This had two important consequences relevant to this discussion. First, because the local governments were subsidizing the productions, they

had the ability to censor anything of which they didn't approve morally, religiously, or politically. Second, the taxes that supported the opera houses were not always consistent as political power changed hands. Despite all the upheaval, opera theaters were very well attended, but perhaps only one bad production away from failure. The *opera seria* was the most costly type of opera to produce with its elaborate sets, costumes, and expensive singers; but it was also the most prestigious and desirable.¹ While composers benefited from the popularity of opera, they were also subject to many of the same factors that affected the theaters. It wasn't until the early nineteenth century that a composer in Italy was able to earn a living as an opera composer apart from holding a *maestro di cappella* (director of church music) position or having a noble patron. However, despite their ability to make an independent living, composers and librettists were still at the mercy of various forces: the whims of nobles, censors, and a conservative audience that was resistant to change.² This led many of the leading composers in Italy, including Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi, to travel to Paris or other European capitals for work, where the political and economic stability of the opera houses were more secure.

The powerful presence of the Roman Catholic Church, both geographically and socially, had a great influence on Italian opera from its very beginnings, in fact the Church was “the center of Italian cultural and political tradition.”³ Despite the amount of power the church had, religious attitudes, even in conservative Italy, were changing during the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century. “Religious sentiment among the educated classes...became increasingly lukewarm.”⁴ As early as the 1760's, certain kingdoms in Italy had already been

1 Alexander Ringer, ed., *The Early Romantic Era Between Revolutions: 1789 and 1848* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 179-180.

2 Ringer, 161-163.

3 Franco Venturi, "Church and Reform in Enlightenment Italy: The Sixties of the Eighteenth Century," *The Journal of Modern History*, no. 2 (1976) <http://ezproxy.missouriwestern.edu:2078/stable/1879827> (Accessed August 6, 2014).

4 Ringer, 161.

establishing different types of independence from the papacy. One of the ways places like Milan and Modena reformed their relationship with the Church was by stripping power from the Holy Offices of the Inquisition or abolishing them altogether. Papal control over censorship was also eliminated in certain cities. Venice was one of the most liberal cities in this regard, as Franco Venturi asserts: “The awareness that a new relationship had to be set up between church and state penetrated deeply into the consciousness, and at least in part into the social and practical reality of the Republic [of Venice]... But there can be no doubt of the importance for all Italy of the discussion which took place...in the books, even in the paintings and engravings of the Republic of Venice.”⁵ The invasion of Napoleon halted most of the social and political changes taking place in relation to the Roman Catholic Church. While Napoleon was in power, the Pope was temporarily stripped of the Papal States and some temporal power, but he regained most of the land and power after the Congress of Vienna. While the censors in the eighteenth century had been a little more permissive, they were stricter after the fall of Napoleon in order to support the new governments. This censorship manifested in both political and religious veins and resulted in “...the 'most crippling' and 'most insidious' aspect of 19th century theatrical censorship in Italy: the 'intimidation of librettists'.”⁶

Objections by the Roman Catholic Church to the portrayal of their ceremonies on stage are not surprising. Musicologist Francesco Izzo explains, “One simple explanation for the widespread censorship of Christian themes is, of course, the concern that the mimetic representation of sacred locales or ceremonies and the use of religious text or expression might be deemed disrespectful of the sacredness of the Scriptures and of the Catholic liturgy.”⁷

5 Venturi, 229.

6 Phillip Gossett, et al., *The New Grove Masters of Italian Opera* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983), 48.

7 Francesco Izzo, "Verdi, the Virgin, and the Censor: The Politics of the Cult of Mary in I Lombardi alla prima

Different parts of Italy had varied standards of what was acceptable on stage. Being the seat of power for the Catholic Church, Rome and the Papal States were some of the strictest censors in Italy. One practical example of the censors's restrictions in these matters is a substitution of the words “nume” or “numi” which translates “god” or “the gods,” meaning pagan god(s), or “cielo” meaning “heaven” instead of “Dio” or “Iddio,” which refers specifically to the Judeo-Christian God. Besides the restrictions of the censors, Italy was socially and morally fairly conservative. It is not surprising that opera impresarios were anxious to keep the public happy since they were always in something of a precarious financial position. Despite the reactionary nature of the Roman Catholic censors during the *bel canto* era, they could not completely obscure the changes begun in the previous century.

There were plenty of non-Christian religious ceremonies and prayers on the stage in Italy and other parts of Europe, especially in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The ideals of the Enlightenment were disseminated not only in politics, education, literature, and other fine arts, but also in opera. There was an interest in Roman and Greek ideas and that was reflected in the choice of subject for opera librettos. Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) was a very important composer of one of the periods preceding *bel canto*. His operas with prayers for heroines who find themselves in dire straits are numerous, and as the plots were set in times of antiquity or mythology the prayers were to gods and goddesses of times past. *Iphigénie en Tauride* (Iphigenia in Tauris, 1779) is one such opera. Since Gluck's heroine is a priestess of the goddess Diana, there is plenty of opportunity for religious ceremony. There are also two prayers for the heroine that are not part of a ceremony: “O toi, qui prolongeas mes jour” (Oh you who prolongs my days) and “Je t'implore et je tremble” (I implore you and I tremble). Cherubini's

Medée (1797) was another opera with a plot based in mythology, specifically the story of Jason and Medea. The story includes a powerful invocation prayer to the gods “numi” to come to Medea's aid. A third example is Gaspare Spontini's *La Vestale* (The Vestal Virgin, 1807) with another priestess as a main character. All of these operas were written for and first performed in France, but they were translated into Italian and seen in Italy. Even if they weren't always popular with the Italian audience, they were heard by other musicians and composers in Italy and had some influence. Gioachino Rossini was one of the composers influenced by Gluck and Spontini.⁸

⁸ Ringer, 147.

Rossini

Gioachino Rossini was undoubtedly one of the more powerful forces in the *primo ottocento* (early nineteenth century) opera landscape. The first prayer we will examine in detail is “Deh, Tu reggi in tal momento” (You, who reign in this moment) from *La gazza ladra* (The Thieving Magpie). *La gazza ladra* is a *melodramma* or *semiseria* opera, meaning it blends both comic and serious elements. The story is originally a French play that was made into an Italian libretto by an amateur librettist, Giovanni Gherardini. The main idea of the plot is happy lovers who have to deal with an interfering parent. Ninetta is a servant to the family of her lover, and when a silver spoon goes missing, the meddling parent insists she be arrested. She is sentenced to death for the thievery, and on her way to the gallows she stops to pray. The comic portion of the story is present in other places of the plot and all ends happily. It turns out a magpie stole the spoon, thus the title. The opera premiered in Milan at La Scala in 1817, and Rossini desired to cater to the intellectual and sophisticated Milanese audience. The Austrians had control of Milan after the Congress of Vienna (1814), and they were very influential in all aspects of society, including opera. Rossini's two previous operas for Milan were not very successful, so he was anxious to please the audience. He traveled to Milan in January of 1817 and attended a performance of German composer Peter von Winter's (1754-1825) opera *Il Maometto* (The Mohammed). Winter's opera included two things that seemed to influence Rossini's opera: a focus on orchestration, and a prayer scene. Prayers had not been seen on the La Scala stage (at least not in present memory) and it was a very popular scene of the opera.⁹ Though Winter's opera may have encouraged Rossini to add a prayer to his opera, it was hardly his first operatic prayer scene. Rossini had written an elaborate prayer scene with chorus for another of his heroines in *Tancredi* four years earlier in Venice, “Giusto Dio che umile adoro” (Just God who

⁹ Francis Toye, *Rossini: A Study in Tragi-Comedy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 73.

the humble adore).

The *Tancredi* prayer ran into problems with the censors in many of the places it was performed in Italy.¹⁰ The setting of *Tancredi* is second-century Syracuse, a place and time where the majority of the population was Christian. Despite the setting and time being remote, which often helped certain things to be passed over by the censors, they still objected to the direct language of the prayer, using the word “Dio” repeatedly. For *La gazza ladra*, instead of being more cautious with the wording of Ninetta's prayer, Rossini and his librettist went even further in their use of Christian language. *La gazza ladra* is set in a modern time and European place and the people are “everyday” people. There were no records of trouble with the censors for *La gazza ladra*. Two plausible reasons are that the censors in each city were different and had different criteria, and it was a *melodramma* and not an *opera seria*.

Rossini manages the drama of Ninetta's scene very wisely, opening with the chorus singing sympathetic words about Ninetta and setting the stage for the unfortunate heroine's prayer. To add to the drama and pathos of the moment, Ninetta stops to pray in front of the church in a pause during the procession to her execution. The chorus feels sorry for Ninetta's plight but does not join her. Their comments before her prayer are: “Unhappy, unlucky girl, you are resigned to your fate. No, death is not cruel, when it brings an end to torture.” As she is praying, they sing: “Ah, your fate would move a stone to pity.” She prays to “Iddio” or “Dio,” the Judeo-Christian God. This immediately marks the difference between this prayer and prayers like the ones seen on the French stage late in the last century, like those found in the operas of Spontini and Gluck. Ninetta is not a Roman or a mythical character, nor does she pray to a generic or Roman god. Even the inspiring prayer from *Il Maometto* was to a generic god. There is another prayer in Rossini's opera, a trio where both Ninetta and her father pray as asides. They

¹⁰ Izzo, 559.

pray that “Nume,” the more generic word for god, will protect him. “Deh, Tu reggi in tal momento” is much more overtly Christian.

The opening section of the aria is four lines of text, with a simple melodic line that becomes successively more decorated with each phrase.¹¹ The melodic line of the first half of the aria begins with the first two-measure phrase section starting on a C5, the next two-measure section begins on a D5, and the last section of the phrase on an E5 (See Fig. 1). This ascending sequence of the melody can easily be interpreted by the audience as pleading.

41 Deh tu reggi in tal mo -

44 -men - to il mio cor, pie - to - so Id.
- proa - ches, guide my steps, mer - ci - ful

47 di - Sav. - o! - iour!

Figure 1. Rossini, *La gazza ladra*, “Deh tu reggi,” measures 41-48.

Ninetta sings the same melodic structure again, but now with a sextuplet figuration to decorate the third beat and an extra four measures to delay the final cadence of the section. The extension of the last phrase also leaves space for a cadenza if desired during the dominant chord of the final dominant-tonic cadence. With a three-measure orchestral interlude, Rossini modulates from C

¹¹ See Appendix A

major to the parallel C minor for a contrasting section. Though this second half of the aria is technically not addressed to any deity, but instead to the guards, it seems pertinent to include it as a part of the analysis because of its relationship to the text of the prayer as well as its musical relationship to the short scene beforehand. In the staging directions in the libretto, Ninetta does not resume her walk to the gallows until after she sings this last portion. There is a rhythmic continuity between this new melodic line and the previous section because of the use of the double-dotted-eighth note-thirty-second note combinations that were seen in the opening melody of the prayer as well. These rhythmic devices can be seen in Figure 1. After the first melodic statement of the new idea by Ninetta, the tenors quietly echo an almost identical melody. In a surprising gesture, the orchestra plays *fortissimo* as the full chorus sings the melody again in E-flat major. The major key only lasts for one phrase. Ninetta echos the chorus, starting before their statement is finished. Rossini's use of sequence to modulate to higher keys is exciting and effective. The composer surprises with a diminished chord borrowed from "iv" (E diminished seventh) rather than a return to the tonic twice before finally resolving with a strong dominant-tonic cadence. One feature of the chorus-soloist relationship in this piece is a short one-measure section where the chorus sings the first eighth-note and Ninetta sings the second (see Fig. 2). This happens twice, and the effect is somewhat strange. What might easily be dramatically interpreted as sobbing for the soprano smacks of a strange echo and looks like medieval hocket.

- ni - sca di sof - frir,
suf - f'ring as my own,

sas - so im - pie - to - sir,
melt a heart of stone,

sas - so im - pie - to - sir,
melt a heart of stone,

sas - so im - pie - to - sir,
melt a heart of stone,

Figure 2. Rossini, *La gazza ladra*, “Deh tu reggi,” measures 81-82.

It has been remarked by several scholars that Rossini took extra care in his orchestration of *La gazza ladra* at a time when he was composing entire operas in the space of three weeks. As mentioned before, this is likely due to the Germanic-influenced tastes of the Milan audience. Rossini's orchestral writing has been aptly described as having “opaque tutti and brilliant contrasting splashes of wind color.”¹² Rossini regularly contrasts the color of the horns against the strings in the first section of the prayer. The winds are often inserted towards the end of the vocal phrase, but the strings make up the majority of the accompaniment for the voice. The flute is often paired with the voice, especially in the second half of the piece. As the heroine repeats and decorates the melody, the orchestral forces are increased and the *tutti* plays at the end of the vocal phrases and prepares the next phrase. All of the orchestration is kept simple. Rossini seems content to let the simple beauty of the prayer stand on its own, showcasing his melodic

12 Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*. Vol. 2, *From Il Trovatore to La Forza del destino* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 6.

talents. In the contrasting section in C minor, the orchestral color is much fuller as the dramatic impetus changes. When the chorus sings *fortissimo*, there are drums marking some of the dotted rhythms, foreshadowing that the march must continue. After Ninetta joins, the drums only play on the highest note of her phrase, increasing in frequency as the piece comes to a close. The orchestra then plays the entire second half of the piece again with much fanfare and percussion as Ninetta and the chorus resume their now silent march.

La gazza ladra was very popular in Italy, and helped advance Rossini's career. The rustic setting and the simplicity of Ninetta's vocal line were appealing to audiences. Rossini's restraint during the prayer scene foreshadowed the developments of his later *opera seria* and the composers who came after him.¹³

13 Phillip Gossett, et al., *The New Grove Masters of Italian Opera* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983), 31-32.

Donizetti

Rossini's legacy in Italian opera was formidable, and other composers who wished to be successful were almost forced by the audience's tastes to compose in his style. Donizetti was no exception to this in the beginning of his career. Though his early pieces show his talent, the style of Rossini seemed to limit him. It was in the composition of the tragic *Anna Bolena*, the first of his trilogy of operas on Tudor queens, that Donizetti's individual style begins to emerge.¹⁴ The movement away from Rossini's style was very gradual. Much as Rossini made innovations at the beginning of the century, Donizetti bridged changes between Rossini and the next generation.¹⁵

Maria Stuarda, the second of Donizetti's operas on the Tudor queens, premiered at La Scala in 1835. The opera is a quasi-historical account of Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I of England. The scene for our consideration occurs after Mary has been sentenced to death and is about to mount the platform for her beheading. In "Deh, Tu di un'umile preghiera" (Oh, You who hear a humble prayer) she prays for the end of suffering and to be welcomed into God's kingdom with love. The chorus participates in prayer with her. Donizetti's opera is aptly summarized by one critic thus: "the crux of his plot is actually "due illustri rivali," or two distinguished rivals, in which neither woman wins, though there is a religious veneer." Interestingly, Donizetti referred to the two queens in a letter as "those two queens who were whores," an opinion that clearly did not extend to the librettist. The words of Maria's final prayer are not the prayers of a "whore," whatever the composer may have thought of her character.¹⁶

Donizetti had his share of problems with the censors in this opera. The heroine prays to

¹⁴ Gossett, 112.

¹⁵ Ringer, 189.

¹⁶ Alexander Weatherson, "Queen of Dissent: Mary Stuart and the Opera in Her Honor by Carlo Coccia," Donizetti Society, <http://www.donizettisociety.com/Articles/articlemarystuart.htm> (accessed August 5, 2014).

“Dio” and has several exclamations of “Dio” but also “Ciel” (Heaven). Maria also has an aria earlier in the opera, as described by Rodney Stenning Edgecombe in his article:

“O nube che lieve” (her loneliness and desolation privately revealed by the prayer she utters to a passing cloud), which contrasts with... (“Deh! Tu di un'umile preghiera”) that registers the impact of her pending death through the use of the chorus. For, like its counterpart in Greek tragedy, the chorus of the *primo ottocento* functions as a stylized social voice...[in] many moments of otherwise personal anguish or joy.¹⁷

The prayer to the cloud is clearly an allusion to God, but evidently neither Donizetti nor his librettist wanted to chance its being censored. Despite their efforts, *Maria Stuarda* had a difficult time being seen and heard because in its day it had many difficulties with the religious and political censors. In 1865, after Italy was almost entirely united under one ruler, a revival was attempted but Donizetti's popularity was no longer strong enough to secure for the opera a place in the repertory.¹⁸ One of Donizetti's other operas that had similar problems of censorship was *Poliuto* (1838). In Naples, *Poliuto* was entirely rejected due to the subject matter, which was the life and death of a Christian saint. The Bourbon monarch refused to allow the martyrdom of a Christian saint to be portrayed on the stage of the Teatro San Carlo.

One of the notable features of Maria's prayer is, as Ashbrook and Budden note, “Donizetti's ability to generate long, satisfying periods from plain, often predictable extensions of a single rhythmic idea.”¹⁹ The specific rhythmic idea in the prayer scene consists of a two-measure pattern in triple meter (see Fig. 3). This motive appears five times in Maria's opening of the scene, comprising sixteen measures.

17 Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, “Conventions of Prayer in Some 19th Century Operas,” *The Musical Times* 146, No. 1893 (Winter 2005): 48, <http://ezproxy.missouriwestern.edu:2138/stable/30044124> (accessed April 7, 2014).

18 Jeremy Commons, “*Maria Stuarda*,” *The Musical Times* 107, no. 1477 (1966): 207, <http://ezproxy.missouriwestern.edu:2078/stable/953359> (accessed August 2, 2014).

19 Gossett, 118.

154

Deh! Tu di un u - mi - le pre - ghie - ra il
 Thou Who art mer - ci - ful, Who art my

158

suo - - no o - di, o be - ne - fi - co
 Sa - - vior, grant of Thy cha - ri - ty

Figure 3. Donizetti, *Maria Stuarda*, “Deh, Tu di un'umile preghiera,” measures 154-160.

The second section of the aria is rhythmically closely related to the first. It is also a two-measure pattern (see Fig.4).

È va-no il pian - to il Ciel m'a - i - ta...
 our tears are need-less. Heaven will help me...

Figure 4. Donizetti, *Maria Stuarda*, “Deh, Tu di un'umile preghiera,” measures 195-198.

Donizetti's prayer scene in *Maria Stuarda* includes the chorus as an integral part. In contrast to the Rossini scene in which the chorus and soloist have musical interaction but don't have a strong dramatic connection, the chorus and soloist are intricately connected musically and dramatically in Donizetti's scene. Maria and the crowd are participating in the same prayer. In the Rossini prayer, the chorus never unites with the heroine in singing the same melody or words together. Even though they are interacting in a more closely related manner than Ninetta and her chorus, there are only two eight-measure sections in which Maria and the chorus sing the same melodic line together. Musically, this allows for an elongation of the scene with the soloist

singing a phrase and the chorus echoing it or responding to it as the soloist often soars above, only occasionally uniting. Dramatically, the soloist sometimes prays with the chorus, while also being able to express her own pathos. This dramatic and musical device had been used before Donizetti. Rossini used the same overall structure in *Tancredi* for the prayer scene.

In Donizetti's prayer, we have an instrument that we've expected to hear as part of a prayer. The harp, an instrument mentioned in the Bible multiple times in connection with King David of Israel and with Heaven, is a logical choice for the instrumentation of an operatic prayer. After her recitative, the prayer commences with the *tutti* orchestra sounding a full B-flat seventh chord (a V^7), just as the score instructs Maria and the chorus to kneel together. Then the strings sound three *piano pizzicato* chords. One measure before the soloist enters, the harp outlines an E-flat chord (I) and the strings punctuate the downbeat of each measure as Maria sings her prayer. The bassoons join the harp in the third vocal phrase and the strings increase in volume. As the chorus enters, rather suddenly, so does the *tutti* orchestra with a quick *fortepiano*. The harp continues to arpeggiate the chord while the rest of the orchestra doubles the chorus on the melody. As Maria and the chorus join to sing the same words and the melody, the timpani and bass drum join the orchestra and add fullness. This is reminiscent of the Rossini *La gazza ladra* prayer which also has percussion added at a climactic moment. Interestingly, not all the scores agree on the addition of the percussion. The Metropolitan Opera's recent production did not have the timpani or bass drum during the prayer. Some of this may be due to the factors described below by Jeremy Commons:

Donizetti himself prepared a vocal score with piano accompaniment, but the publication of a full score was a rare occurrence in Italy at that period. Instead, impresarios and musicians depended on hand-written scores, painstakingly produced by firms of copyists. There are at least three such "factory" scores of *Maria Stuarda*: two in Naples and one in Paris. The two in Naples show variants in the opening chorus, but agree for the most part elsewhere; that in Paris contains a totally different opening chorus, omits an off-stage

hunting-chorus, and modifies the role of Mary throughout, showing that in accordance with the custom of the day the part had been “adjusted” to suit the voice of some particular prima donna.²⁰

One of the Naples scores does not contain the harp solo passages in the prayer, but Donizetti's autographed vocal score has notes indicating some of the instrumentation.²¹ The other remarkable moment of orchestral scoring directly follows the phrases with the percussion. Maria has a brief solo phrase and the orchestra transitions from a *tutti* texture to harp and solo woodwinds. As soon as the chorus re-enters the full orchestra does as well. The remainder of the scene is mostly varied through dynamic changes rather than orchestral color changes. Since Donizetti's opera was denied its rightful place in the repertory during his lifetime, it is exciting to see it appear more regularly on the stage in the current repertory.

20 Commons, 207.

21 Ibid.

Verdi

The next scene for consideration is from Giuseppe Verdi's, *La forza del destino* (The Power of Fate). It was composed in 1862 for performance in Russia, and was presented in Rome in 1863. Between Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* and Verdi's opera, there were major changes in the Italian political and social landscape. In 1846, with nationalist sentiments in Italy on the rise, a liberal pope was elected and began making changes in the Papal States and the Church structure that were long overdue. The Papal States had been a gift of land to the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. The Pope's temporal power over these lands fluctuated greatly over the centuries. Resentment against the Church had been building because of the way the Papal States were governed. When Italians rose up against Austrian occupation in 1848, the Pope refused to support Italy since both countries were Catholic. The refusal angered the Italians to such a degree that the Pope had to flee the Vatican. This would have been unthinkable in 1835. When the Italians nullified the Church's claim on the Papal States, the Pope appealed to other Catholic leaders for assistance. The French rushed to the aid of the Pope and kept him safe in the Papal States from 1850-1870. Despite being able to keep its lands with the assistance of foreign rulers, the Catholic Church lost much of its social and spiritual authority with the Italian people. While the Pope was guarded in the Vatican, Italy was struggling through its Risorgimento and close to being totally united as one country. At the time of Verdi's composition, all but the Papal States and Venice had been united under one king. One of the implications for opera composers was that religious censorship had lost most of its teeth well before this opera was composed.²²

²² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Pius IX," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/462365/Pius-IX> (accessed August 17, 2014).

By 1862, the *preghiera* scene was basically a standard part of the tragic opera. In general, there were four acts, and the prayer scene was in the start of the last act.²³ However, one prayer was not enough for *La forza del destino*. The heroine has her traditional act four prayer scene “Pace mio Dio” (Peace my God) that is quite famous, and a short prayer at the end of the second act with chorus “La vergine degli angeli” (The Virgin of the Angels). The prayer that seemed the most interesting choice to examine is the other second act prayer: “Madre pietosa Vergine” (Mother, pitying Virgin). Not only is the placement of the prayer different, but Verdi's use of the chorus and structure of the prayer are also worth noting. The plot of the opera is rather complex, but the heroine Leonora and her lover Alvaro are leaving to elope when her father interrupts them. Her father is accidentally fatally wounded in the process. The lovers flee but get separated and Leonora's brother pursues them to take revenge. After she is nearly discovered by her brother, Leonora seeks refuge at a monastery and takes up the life of a hermit. It is at the moment she has arrived at the monastery that she sings “Madre pietosa Vergine.” The opera ends with the death of Leonora's brother at the hands of her lover. As he is dying, Leonora's brother's last act is to kill her and avenge their father. Verdi took full advantage of the fact that the plot leads the heroine to a monastery to make use of the dramatic effect that prayer could evoke.

Another reason “Madre pietosa Vergine” is an interesting choice of study is because the prayer is addressed to the Virgin Mary. Verdi is the first Italian composer to use prayers to the Virgin Mary in his operas. *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (The Lombards on the First Crusade) is the first opera of the nineteenth century to refer to Mary, and *Giovanna d'Arco* (Joan of Arc) is his second opera with Marian references. Both compositions are early in his operatic output, in the 1840's. Because opera is a synthesis of several art forms and includes drama, visual arts, and

23 Donald Jay Grout, *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 221.

music, it is often downstream of trends and ideas that appear in other forms of “fine arts.” This was the case with prayers to the Virgin. There were an increasing number of prayers appearing in works of literature (both in Italy and abroad) and more artistic depictions of Mary as the century progressed.²⁴ As is typical of this period, artistic and social ideas generally appeared in Italian culture a little later than on the rest of the Continent. *La forza del destino* has two Marian prayers. Dramatically, it is very interesting that though there are several exclamations of “Dio,” the formal prayer itself is addressed to “Madre” (literally mother, but referring to the Virgin Mother). In latter portions of the aria, Leonora addresses “Signor” (Lord) asking that she not be abandoned and for mercy. A large part of Leonora's suffering is due to her feeling responsible for her father's death and the fact that he spoke a curse upon her as his dying words. Her prayer to the “Virgin Mother” for forgiveness and to the “Lord” to not be alone give a further insight into her character. While praying to Mary is not remarkable in a religious sense, dramatically, this is an interesting idea. Her second prayer, of the same act, is addressed solely to the Virgin. As for her Act IV prayer, many years pass before Leonora addresses her prayer to “mio Dio” “my God.”

“Madre pietosa Vergine” has an interesting form. It can be classified as an expanded *romanza* (an aria in a slow tempo) with a minor and major section, but it is a very fluid form. Many of the sections appear as interruptions to the prayer itself as Leonora's emotions change. In fact, it is a musical reflection of the mental and emotional state of Leonora, which alternates between thankfulness, pleading, panic, fear, and hope. The harmonic structure also parallels the upheaval of the heroine's situation. Though the piece starts in C-sharp minor, it modulates to E minor very quickly, and then doesn't firmly settle in another key until the actual prayer begins in B minor. Budden posits that this section recalls Schubert's “Gretchen am Spinnrade” in its

²⁴ Izzo, 559.

accompaniment, pointing out that Verdi set an Italian translation of the poem years earlier and thus was likely familiar with Schubert's setting.²⁵ The modulation to B major brings us to the second half of the *romanza* structure. It is interrupted by the chanting of the monks, which calms Leonora momentarily. A short, paranoid recitative connects us back to the B major section, which is expanded and concludes with a short coda. Melodically, the prayer has opening phrase gestures similar to the prayer from *La gazza ladra*. The melodic figure has a rising note on the downbeat of each new two-measure phrase. The first begins on D5, and then it climbs twice more to the high point of F-sharp5 on the third phrase (see Fig. 5). The minor portion of the prayer has short phrases of two measures that pair with the agitation in the accompaniment, while the major portion has swelling four-measure phrases (see Fig. 6).

25 Budden, 464.

dolce

Ma - dre, Ma - dre, pie - to - sa
Moth - er, Moth - er of mer - cy,

Ver - gi - ne, per - do - na al mio pec -
Maid - en blest, For - give me my trans -

ca - to, m'a - iu - ta quel - l'in -
gres - sion, Thy love dis - pel my

gra - to
pas - sion

Figure 5. Verdi, *La forza del destino*, “Madre pietosa Vergine,” measures 65-71.

con più forza

mi la - sciar, soc - cor - ri - mi, pie - tà, Si - gnor, pie - tà,
sake me not, O guard me still, O Thou, my on - ly stay!

Figure 6. Verdi, *La forza del destino*, “Madre pietosa Vergine,” measures 112-115.

The main portion of the prayer to the Virgin is for strings and woodwinds with occasional interjections by the horns. The woodwinds gradually get thicker, building the intensity. As soon as the major section begins, it starts with only the string tremolo, then Verdi adds sustained woodwinds and horns. It is restrained, but still provides a large contrast to the “interruption” of the monks, which is scored for only organ and male chorus. The inclusion of the organ shows

again how far attitudes about religious symbolism and ceremony in opera had progressed from Rossini. For the recitative that connects to the repeat of the major section, Verdi adds the full orchestra again quickly while leaving Leonora's fearful outbursts entirely without accompaniment. As the string tremolos and woodwinds underpin the repeat of the major section, Verdi adds the timpani and bass drum. In her final swelling statement of the theme, the woodwinds double the melody. Verdi's masterful use of form, orchestration, and melodic contour all serve the drama of the scene.

The *Otellos*

The nineteenth century was a time of change, and many changes affected opera. Two of the composers already discussed, Rossini and Verdi, both wrote operas on the subject of Otello. The operas were premiered 71 years apart. The heroines of each version say a prayer just before their untimely demise. By looking closely at both of these prayers, we can trace some of the commonalities and changes that happened over the course of the century. The success of Rossini's *Otello* was likely a factor in the delay between Verdi's acquisition of the Boito libretto and his composition of the opera.²⁶ Budden says of Rossini's opera, "... Despite its structural inventiveness... [it] remains for its first two acts essentially a traditional number-opera. What kept Rossini's *Otello* alive and in general repute was the last act, which even today can rightly be viewed as one of the supreme achievements of *ottocento* [nineteenth-century] opera."²⁷

Rossini's *Otello* premiered at the San Carlo in Naples in 1816. The librettist was the Neapolitan Marchese Berio. The work became quite famous during its day, but the libretto has been a sticking point for many years because of the changes Berio made to Shakespeare's plot. Berio softened some of the harsher parts of Shakespeare's tragedy to cater to the tastes of the time, but Desdemona's death remained as in the original play. In the early years of Rossini's career, the Italian public's taste in opera plots had more in common with those of the previous century. The *opera seria* traditionally had a *lieto fine* or "happy ending." It was bold of Rossini's librettist to keep the tragic ending considering that generally it wasn't until 1825 to 1830 that the Italian public was willing to accept stories that ended sadly.²⁸

Desdemona's prayer, "Deh calma o ciel" (O Heaven Calm Me), is the earliest prayer considered in this study. It has the most veiled reference to any kind of deity of any of the

26 Julian Budden, 303.

27 Ibid

28 Francis Toye, *Rossini: A Study in Tragi-Comedy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1963), 64-65.

prayers previously discussed. Desdemona prays to “Ciel” (heaven) for sleep. Though it is clearly a prayer, it has more in common with the type of “prayer” found in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* in the Countess's first appearance, “Porgi amor qualche ristoro” (Give O Love some Relief) than Rossini's *La gazza ladra* prayer of only a year later. Berio's creation of this prayer (there is no prayer in the Shakespeare play) was a stroke of dramatic genius, and also another piece of evidence that prayer in opera was gaining popularity in Italy. It is shocking to consider that the *La gazza ladra* prayer is only composed a year later, and has much franker religious language. This is evidence of the important roles of librettists and the ever-changing tastes of the public. Another likely factor in this choice of words was the conservativeness of King Ferdinand of Naples, where the opera premiered. He had only returned to his kingdom the year before *Otello* premiered after a fifteen-year absence due to Napoleon's occupation and empire. The Bourbon monarchs who ruled Naples continued to be conservative politically and religiously, as both Donizetti and Verdi discovered.

This aria is only twenty-six measures long. It can be divided into four four-measure phrases and one two-measure coda with both an orchestral introduction and postlude. The last six measures are repeated material from the beginning of the aria. Harmonically, the structure is simple, though there are secondary dominant chords from “ii” and “vii” and secondary diminished chords from “IV” and “V.” There are interesting moments of chromaticism in the vocal line. The *Otello* prayer and the *La gazza ladra* prayer have very similar opening melodies. “Deh calma o ciel” opens with the sweeping melodic line climbing higher step by step. Beginning with a sixth jump to C5, the next part of the phrase leaps a minor seventh to D-flat5, then finally ascends the whole octave to E-flat5 (see Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Rossini, *Otello*, “Deh calma, o ciel,” measures 127-131.

The melodic idea of gradually rising phrases seems to be a very popular one for prayers.

Sextuplet figures are also part of the melodic ornamentation, but it is not a highly decorated aria.

The prayer is only orchestrated with brass, horns, and winds. The clarinet and flute are the instruments that participate most heavily in the aria.

Verdi's prayer for Desdemona is the “traditional” fourth act prayer that had become standard in serious operas of the day. It is another Marian prayer, just like “Madre pietosa Vergine,” but this prayer is more theologically significant as it uses the text of the traditional “Ave Maria” in Italian. Verdi had attempted to have an “Ave Maria” as part of an opera before, but it was rejected. Before *I Lombardi* premiered in Milan in 1843, it was subjected to the censors of the archbishop of Milan, and the Cardinal was furiously opposed to many of the elements included. The police chief (who was also a count) liked Verdi and allowed the opera to go on as planned except for a few minor changes. One of those minor changes was the wording of the heroine's Marian prayer. Out of respect for the Cardinal, the “Ave Maria” was changed to a “Salve Maria” which was of a lesser religious significance. The next opera with significant Marian references and prayers was not as kindly received by the censors as *I Lombardi*. Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845) was treated much more harshly by Milan's censors, and many references to Mary were somehow obscured or even completely taken out.²⁹

This prayer in Verdi's *Otello* is used as a dramatic device, not just to arouse audience

29 Izzo, 561-64.

sympathy for Desdemona, but also to put space between the sorrow of the “Willow Song” and Otello's entrance. The recitative is sung entirely on the same note, reciting the words of the prayer. The melody is mostly three-measure phrases, but Verdi's phrases are flexible and the stress is often in a different place in the phrase. Because much of the melodic motion is conjunct, it has been suggested that it resembles plainchant.³⁰ Another factor that helps suggest plainchant is the freedom of the meter.

Her utter solitude and the simplicity of the prayer are striking. Muted strings are the only accompaniment to the entire piece, with the cello adding depth in the swells of the vocal line. Budden suggests that one of the musical figures that occur in the viola part is representative of a soft sob (see Fig. 8 measures 280-1).³¹

The image shows a musical score for Verdi's *Otello*, "Ave Maria," measures 278-281. The score is written for voice (D) and piano. The vocal line is in a single note, reciting the words of the prayer. The piano accompaniment features a soft sob figure in the viola part. The lyrics are: "pre - - - ga, pre - ga sem - pre e nel - lo - - ra del - la / pray - - - er, pray for us now, — pray for us now, — and in the". The piano part includes a *ppp* marking.

Figure 8 Verdi, *Otello*, “Ave Maria,” measures 278-281.

This prayer is interrupted just as Leonora's prayer in *La forza del destino*, but the orchestra is the device that interrupts the prayer rather than other singers or frantic mood changes.

30 Budden, 394.

31 *Ibid.*

Conclusion

After a detailed study of the scenes and arias above, it is easy to see how the tastes and sensibilities of the Italian people changed. Some of the changes were social in nature and some were political. Francesco Izzo, in his article about Verdi and his operatic references to the Virgin Mary, says:

The proliferation of sacred themes was indeed a broad phenomenon in the culture of the “long” nineteenth century. During and following the French Revolution, organized Christian religion (and particularly the Catholic Church) was characteristically associated with antiprogressive political movements, and became increasingly disenfranchised from governmental agencies as the new century unfolded. At the same time a more emotional and spiritual view of Christianity emerged. Romantic writers, poets, artists and musicians often resorted to Christian elements not only in scriptural, liturgical, or devotional contexts, but also emphasizing the moral and domestic aspects of religion; they also used expressions of religiosity, prayers, and depictions of ceremonies and processions to enhance the local color or the emotional intensity of paintings, poems, literary works and operatic scenes.³²

The progression of language referring to God in opera may seem insignificant, but again, it was part of a major social change taking place in Italy. Priests and religious figures had been made fun of in non-serious opera (*opera buffa*) for many years prior to the nineteenth century. However, it was an entirely different thing to allow the representation of Christian ceremonies on stage in a serious context. The attitudes of the public were often behind what the censors would allow. The bigger shifts in social feeling were the most pronounced leading up to the 1848 revolutions.

Harmonically, the prayers are rather ordinary examples of the tonal relationships, chromaticism, and chordal changes typical of the movements during the Romantic Era. However, the form and flexibility of form is a very progressive feature of the prayer scenes. It may be that composers saw the prayer as a moment in the opera to experiment with a new form

³² Izzo, 558.

instead of being tied to the *cavatina/cabaletta* structure that became standard during the period.

Besides experimentation with form, some composers also used the prayer to experiment with orchestration. The use of percussion in prayers may seem like a strange thing to modern sensibilities, but it is an effective dramatic device and used by all three composers. Rossini used a number of varied orchestral colors, and changed them as the emotions of his heroine changed. Donizetti's orchestration featured the harp for his prayer, and also some of the same kinds of color changes as Rossini. His nimble shift from a full orchestra to solo players is very impressive. Verdi continues the skilled treatment of the orchestra, but is also less constrained by form than his predecessors. He is unafraid to score the whole of the "Ave Maria" for only muted strings.

As the censorship and social constraints continued to loosen through the century, the librettists and composers pushed back harder against the censors. It is a testament to their fortitude that the prayer became such a staple in the tragic opera. Some of instances of prayer in operas after Verdi include: Puccini's *Tosca*, Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, Cilea's *L'Arlesiana*, and Giordano's *Fedora*. Composers outside Italy were also drawn to the dramatic effect of prayer as exemplified by: Gounod's *Faust*, Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, Berg's *Wozzeck*, Janáček's *Jenůfa*, and Britten's *Gloriana*. This tradition continued on into the rest of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, giving us more beautiful and interesting examples of prayer in opera.

Appendix A

Rossini “Deh Tu reggi”

Preceding chorus: Unhappy, unlucky girl, you are resigned to your fate.

No, death is not cruel, when it brings an end to torture.

Ah, you hold in this moment my heart,

Oh merciful God!

Ah, protect my father

And make my death sufficient for his,

Lead me to death

To the end of my suffering

Chorus: Ah, your fate would move a stone to pity

Donizetti “Deh, Tu di un umile”

Oh, You hear the sound of a humble prayer,

O charitable God of mercy

From the darkness accept me in your forgiveness

My heart has no other shelter, no, no, none

In vain are tears

Heaven will help me

Chorus: Forget the illusion of your life,

Removed from sorrow, removed from concerns, Kind Heaven will forgive you,

Extends a veil over the course of grief

Removed from the sorrow, removed from the grief

I will feast on everlasting love

Verdi “Madre pietosa Vergine”

I've arrived!... thanks be to you oh God!

This is the last refuge for me! I've arrived! I tremble!

My horrid story is known in that inn, it was my brother who told it! If he had discovered me!

Heaven!

He said that Alvaro is sailing westwards! He did not fall dead that night in which I,

I soaked with the blood of my father, followed him and then lost him.

And now he leaves me He flees from me! Ah! Alas, I cannot stand such anguish!

Mother, pitying Virgin, pardon my sin. Help me erase that ingrate from my heart.

In this solitude I will expiate my error.

Have mercy on me Lord, please don't abandon me.

Ah! That sublime chant, the organ's harmonies, that ascend as incense to God in the firmaments, inspiring this soul to faith, comfort, and calm!

To the holy refuge let me hasten. And do I dare at this time? Anyone could surprise me here!

O, wretched Leonora, trembling.

The pious monks will welcome me, they won't refuse, no!

Have mercy on me Lord, please don't abandon me!

Rossini “Deh calma o Ciel”

Please calm, Oh Heaven,
my pain for a little while with sleep
Make my beloved
come to console me
But, if my prayers are in vain,
to my little urn within
let him at least come with tears
to bathe my ashes.

Verdi “Ave Maria”

Hail Mary, full of grace,
chosen among the wives and the virgins are you
Blessed be the the fruit, o blessed one,
of thy womb, Jesus.
Pray for the one who in worship, kneels before you
Pray for the sinner, for the innocent,
and for the weak and oppressed, and for the powerful
also wretched, show thy mercy.
Pray for those who's head is bowed under insult
and under an evil fate;
For us, for us you pray always and in the hour of our death, pray for us.
Hail Mary, in the hour of our death, hail, amen.
Hail! Amen!

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