

The Evolution of
Female Voice Types in Selected
Operas of Giuseppe Verdi

by

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The operas of Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) constitute an important aspect of nineteenth century operatic history. During the course of Verdi's compositional career, a time span of more than fifty years, an evolution of the conventional female voice types occurred in his operas. The soprano and mezzo-soprano vocal categories of the eighteenth century tradition developed new meaning and function through Verdi's work, leading the way to the current understanding and application of the terms. The evolution of the voice types can be traced through his major operas.

This study, presented in a lecture-recital format, comprises an analysis of the evolution of the female voice types found in Verdi's operas Un Ballo in Maschera (1859), Nabucco (1841), Macbeth (1847), Il Trovatore (1854), Don Carlos (1867), and Aida (1872). Portions of the major female roles in each will be discussed and illustrated with musical examples. Related material in other operas of Verdi will also be incorporated.

The lecture-recital is based primarily on contemporary analytical and biographical publications related to Giuseppe Verdi and his work. Other sources include scores and sound recordings of his operas, translations of his letters, and related historical materials.

Introduction

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) appeared on the Italian operatic scene at a time of great upheaval in Italy and in the rest of Europe. Many features of politics, industry, science, religion, and the arts were undergoing reforms which were soon to begin a transition from the order and balance of the Classical years toward the more highly expressive character of the Romantic style. Verdi's works mirrored this upheaval, evolving not only a new vision for the Italian operatic tradition, but also creating a fresh concept for the human voice not envisioned by any of his predecessors.

Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868), the dictator of operatic taste in the beginning of the nineteenth century and the greatest influence in Verdi's early years, had succeeded in producing an operatic formula of standard scene sequences, ensemble patterns, and aria forms that happily satisfied the public's classical taste for entertaining opera. Each aria or duet represented a specific attitude or emotion, and the opera, whether *opera seria* or *opera buffa*, was pleasantly predictable in both form and attitude.¹ Both Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848), Verdi's early contemporaries, limited themselves to these same confines, exploring and expanding, but not initiating any real changes in the stock Rossinian formulae.

The term *drammatico di agilit * appeared as a descriptive label for the type of soprano voice often found in the operas of Bellini and Donizetti.² Bellini's and Donizetti's

¹The Verdi Companion, ed. William Weaver and Martin Chusid. S.v. "On Verdi's Vocal Writing," Rodolfo Celletti, trans. Harold Barnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 218.

²The Verdi Companion, Celletti, 221.

heroines, Norma and Anna Bolena for example, were expected to possess both a dramatic tonal quality and the agility needed to execute complex *fioratura*. This type of voice was an extension of the lyric, coloratura mezzo-soprano so often seen in Rossini's works, for example, Rosina and Cenerentola in the *buffa* vein and Tancredi and Arsaces (Semiramide) in the serious.³

Into this tradition the young Verdi entered, and in his determination to be accepted in this exclusive world of operatic genius, he too, as the novice, walked in the footsteps of the master--Rossini. However, the force of destiny seemed to be with Verdi from the beginning of his compositional career, and he soon distinguished himself as an innovator and a great dramatist, ever stretching, modifying, and eliminating the boundaries set by the Italian tradition. Among Verdi's major contributions toward the development of Italian Romantic opera was his concept for the dramatic importance of the human voice. Early in Verdi's career, his highly emotional writing for the dramatic soprano led directly to the establishment of the more dramatic mezzo-soprano as a voice type in its own right. The dramatic mezzo-soprano and the voice that became known as the "Verdi soprano" both co-existed with the earlier coloratura mezzo-soprano of Rossini's *buffa* tradition.

The operas that Verdi created during his long career as a composer present great variety in content and musical style. The change in Verdi's works occurred gradually but markedly from one work to the next over a period of more than fifty years. One aspect

³ Henry Pleasants notes: "The singers of the early years of grand opera who are remembered specifically or categorically as contraltos, or as mezzo-sopranos, were those too limited in range, or too wanting in industry and determination, to tackle the soprano parts." Henry Pleasants, The Great Singers (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 212.

of his compositions that can be traced in its evolution is that of his use of the human voice, in particular the female voice types, which is quite naturally featured in all of his operas. The operas chosen for this study, Un Ballo in Maschera (1859), Nabucco (1841), Macbeth (1847), Il Trovatore (1854), Don Carlos (1867), and Aïda (1872), have been chosen for the clarity with which each serves to illustrate the evolution of the female voice types mentioned above. In order to view their development in Verdi's works, it is beneficial to begin with an examination of the opera in which all three types appear simultaneously as clearly defined personalities. That opera is Un ballo in maschera.

Un ballo in maschera

Un ballo in maschera is recognized repeatedly as an opera in which bold contrasts give the drama its shape, definition, and forward momentum. In this opera, Julian Budden notes the qualities of dark versus light, good versus evil, the absurd versus the real.⁴ Vincent Godefroy also observes contrasts in Un ballo in maschera such as the darkness of Ulrica's cavern as opposed to the splendor of Riccardo's palace, the contrast between the forces of *comedia* and *tragedia*, and many others.⁵

At this point in his career Verdi was an accomplished composer, and exploited the contrasts that he found in Antonio Somma's reworking of Eugène Scribe's original libretto.

⁴Julian Budden, Verdi (London & Melbourne: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1985), 245 ff.

⁵Vincent Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi: Studies of Selected Operas, 2 vols. (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1977), 2:65-76.

The melodic, dramatic, and orchestral moods shift repeatedly, reflecting Verdi's realization of the conflict inherent in the libretto. Although Verdi was forced to change certain aspects of the opera several times due to the strict controls imposed by the Austrians, his affinity with the heart of the drama preserved the essence of the work and allowed Un ballo in maschera to succeed in spite of the limitations exacted by his censors.⁶

Verdi's elimination of the one-mood-per-aria tradition and his grasp of the emotional ebb and flow of the drama gave him an advantage that a lesser composer could not have understood.⁷ It also gave him the impetus to clarify and define the dramatic, psychological, and vocal characteristics of the female voice. The opposition between the male voice types of tenor, baritone, and bass had been established much earlier in Ernani (1849),⁸ but it was not until Un ballo in maschera that the need to define the female voice types arose.

A system in which singers were ranked by vocal importance rather than by voice type had developed in Italy.⁹ According to this system, called the *convenienze*, most operas contained only three principal, or *primo* roles--the soprano, the tenor, and the baritone. There were also lesser roles, known as *secondi* and *comprimarii*, each with an appropriate amount of solo and ensemble music. If yet another main character were

⁶For an excellent account of the trials of censorship that Verdi was forced to endure, see Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:49-60. For an account with direct quotes from Verdi's correspondence, see Charles Osborne, Verdi (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1978), 148-156.

⁷The Verdi Companion, Celletti, 235-236.

⁸Julian Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 1:34.

⁹Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:22.

called for, it was usually that of either a mezzo-soprano or a bass voice.¹⁰ According to the *convenienze* system all female voices were sopranos; some were prima donnas, some seconda donnas, and some *comprimarii*. A soprano who concentrated on perfecting her lower range was called a contralto.

In Un ballo in maschera, Verdi showed the influence of the *convenienze* and assigned the title *prima* to each of the three females--Ulrica, prima donna contralto, Amelia, prima donna soprano, and Oscar, prima donna soprano (*leggiere*).¹¹ This indicates that each female was equal in importance vocally, musically, and for Verdi, dramatically.¹²

The character of Oscar is the first of the three voice types to appear in Un ballo in maschera. Although a "pants role" or *travesti*, Verdi has scored Oscar for a soprano voice, not for a light mezzo-soprano which is the convention of the earlier Italian tradition.¹³ The lightness of Verdi's writing causes Oscar to appear irresponsibly beyond the reality of the drama. Oscar has no love interest, seems rather decadent in his musical self-indulgence, and possesses no apparent religious morality. His expression of emotion is very limited, very controlled, and it is only when he realizes the danger that is predicted for his dear Riccardo that he loses some of his mindlessness and becomes more concerned for his master.

¹⁰Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:22-23.

¹¹Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:69.

¹²Julian Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:360.

¹³Budden, Verdi, 246.

Oscar sings with cavatina-like grace, a distant relation of Mozart's Cherubino. Julian Budden notes that Oscar's ballata "Volta la terrea" has a somewhat classical feeling about it.¹⁴ The elements of clarity and directness are essential features of this aria, which is representative of the role of Oscar throughout Un ballo in maschera.

[Play the example, "Volta la terrea."]¹⁵

The next female character to appear in Un ballo in maschera is Ulrica, the fortune-teller. Ulrica, a contralto, represents the evil side of humanity, the foil to everything good and pure in Amelia. Ulrica is not only atheistic, she is openly satanic, summoning Beelzebub to be her counterpart. She is angry and vengeful without a clear motive, seems incapable of human love, and lacks any semblance of honorable intent in her actions. She is the protagonist of the opera, singing in angular lines filled with jagged intervals to a heavy, ominous orchestral accompaniment of swiftly changing harmonies.¹⁶ Her connection to the folk idiom is apparent in her quasi-cabaletta, "Re dall'abisso affrettati" with its strongly superstitious overtones and its almost barbaric energy. The following musical example captures the essence of the musical characterization Verdi used for this and later dramatic mezzo-sopranos.

¹⁴Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:381.

¹⁵Giuseppe Verdi, Un ballo in maschera, Chorus and Orchestra of L'Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Rome; cond. by Georg Solti (London: Decca Records), A-4356, OSA-1328. Oscar is sung by Sylvia Stahlman, a soprano who exemplifies the agile soprano style of the earlier Rossini tradition.

¹⁶Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:247.

[Play the example "Re dell' abisso affrettati."]¹⁷

Finally, the heroine, Amelia, enters into this heartless world. Both Oscar and Ulrica seem to frame her sincerity with their absurdity.¹⁸ Verdi designed Amelia's music to depict her as a real human being upon whom falls every possible ill of each situation.¹⁹ Even when Amelia is in a somewhat humorous position (at the end of Act II, for example, her veil slips revealing her to her unsuspecting husband) she remains a humanly frail and tragic figure. The audience does not know whether to laugh at the farce or to cry with the vulnerability of the heroine.

Amelia, when confronted with the difficult situation of the gallows scene, becomes introspective, purposeful, and will strive to do the honorable thing no matter what the cost.²⁰ She is the ultimate victim of love, responding to her inner conflict with prayer and devotion. She sings lyrically in long, arching phrases, often accompanied by a solo instrument, in mostly minor-keyed, cavatina movements. Amelia is a wonderful example of the "Verdi soprano" most often portrayed by the *spinto* soprano voice, a voice characterized by its dark, warm middle register and its somewhat piercing upper range. The following recitative and aria are representative of the compositional style Verdi used when writing for the prima donna soprano.

¹⁷Verdi, Un ballo in maschera, *ibid.* Ulrica is sung by Giulietta Simionato, a mezzo-soprano who possesses the dark quality appropriate for the role of Ulrica as well as for later Verdi mezzo-sopranos.

¹⁸Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:245-247.

¹⁹Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:74.

²⁰Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:72.

[Sing "Ecco l'orrido campo" and a portion of "Ma dall'arrido stelo."]²¹

Never before, or ever again do all three female types appear together in one opera. There are facets of each of the three female voice types present in Verdi's heroines throughout his compositional career. It will remain to be seen that after defining these characters so keenly, Verdi proceeded to obscure the dividing lines between the voice types in his later works, always for the sake of his dramatic integrity.

Origins of the Three Female Voice Types as seen in Verdi's Early Works

The beginning of Verdi's compositional career, twenty years before Un ballo, was a great disappointment to him. Verdi endured immense personal hardship in the death of his wife and two children, and in the rejection by Italian audiences of his first two operas, Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio (1839) and Un giorno di regno (1840).²²

²¹Giuseppe Verdi, Un ballo in maschera, vocal score (New York: G. Schirmer, 1957), 118-122.

²²In a letter to Tito Ricordi dated February 4, 1859, concerning a revival of Simon Boccanegra Verdi described his feelings: "Not more than a year earlier, however, this same audience ill-treated the opera of a poor, sick young man, miserable at the time, with his heart broken by a terrible misfortune. They all knew that, but it did not make them behave courteously. Since that time, I've not seen Un giorno di regno, and I've no doubt it's an awful opera, but heaven knows how many others no better were tolerated and even applauded. Oh, if only the public at that time had, not necessarily applauded, but at least suffered my opera in silence, I shouldn't have been able to find words enough to thank them! If they now look graciously upon those operas of mine that have toured the world, then the score is settled. I don't condemn them: let them be severe. I accept their hisses on condition that I don't have to beg for their applause. We poor gypsies, charlatans, or whatever you want to call us, are forced to sell our labors, our thoughts, and our dreams, for gold. For three lire, the public buys the right to hiss or to applaud. Our fate is one of resignation, and that's all!" Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, selected, trans., and ed. by Charles Osborne (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 119.

Verdi was not as yet the great innovator that he was to become, and at this time he worked with the musical styles and forms as they existed in the tradition of Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti. Both Oberto and Un giorno were "genre" operas, that is, they were typical of the major operatic categories of the time. Oberto is in the serious style and Un giorno is in the *buffa*, or comic style. As Verdi embraced the existing compositional formulae of the time he concurrently adopted the vocal conventions of *fioritura* and embellishment that were associated with these conventions.²³ Opera was written to display the singer's virtuosity while its drama was usually a secondary consideration.²⁴

In both Oberto and Un giorno, Verdi wrote for a prima donna soprano and a prima donna mezzo-soprano. In neither case do these terms describe the relative colors of the voices. They serve merely to define and shape the roles with which they are associated. In Oberto, both Leonora, the prima donna soprano, and Cuniza, the prima donna mezzo-soprano (a role lacking dramatic color, but occasionally foreshadowing Verdi's later mezzo heroines) have the same basic *tessitura*.²⁵

Julian Budden explains that the distinction between the soprano and mezzo-soprano was, at that time, not associated with range.²⁶ The older, more experienced

²³It was taken for granted that a singer in either genre was not only free to embellish passages such as the repeat of the *cabaletta*, but indeed was expected or almost required to do so. Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:17.

²⁴Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:31.

²⁵Charles Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 29.

²⁶Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:80.

Marchesa of Un giorno was cast as the prima donna soprano, while the young ingenue, Giulietta, was labeled the prima donna mezzo-soprano. Giulietta, however, sings higher than Marchesa. This was the standard arrangement in a Rossinian comedy, to which Verdi adhered.

Nabucco, Verdi's First Drama

Nabucco (1841), Verdi's third opera, and the one that Verdi felt was the beginning of his artistic career,²⁷ was a revolution when viewed from the perspective of his earlier, more conventional works. The term *ruvidezza*, or roughness, was applied to Verdi's "new" musical style by critics of the time.²⁸ The dramatic urgency created by this *ruvidezza* was already present in his first two works, and flourished further in Nabucco. With his unpolished energy, Verdi began to establish a dramatic brilliance through his writing for individual characters.²⁹

The two female roles in Nabucco, Abigaille and Fenena, were both intended for soprano voices, although Fenena is now often sung by a mezzo-soprano due to the low *tessitura* of the role. When Verdi wrote Nabucco for La Scala's carnival season of 1841, he had hoped that Giuseppina Strepponi, a well known artist and champion of Verdi's

²⁷George Martin, Verdi: His Music, Life and Times (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1963), 100.

²⁸Martin, Verdi, 104.

²⁹Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 60.

work, would be able to premiere the role of Abigaille, but he did not write Abigaille expressly for La Stropponi³⁰.

Abigaille was intended to be a soprano in the grand tradition of the *drammatico di agilit * of Bellini and Donizetti, with extremes of range, wide intervallic jumps, and outbursts of *fioratura* all intended to help define her authority.³¹ She is, in Budden's words, "a monster", without precedence in the dramas of either Bellini or Donizetti.³²

Verdi was still composing within the grandiose tradition of his time, including such conventions as the mad scene, prayer scene, war and lamenting choruses, march for the dead, and even a small on-stage band. One element that he chose to omit, the lovers' duet, gave Verdi the impetus that was needed to help define the brutality of Abigaille.³³ Had Verdi assigned a love duet to Fenena and Ismaele, it would have placed too much importance on the character of Fenena. If he had given the duet to Abigaille and perhaps Ismaele, it would have altered her character significantly. Instead, Verdi chose to create a woman so full of hate that there was not room in her nature for the softness of a successful love interest.

Abigaille's dramatic recitative "Ben io t'invenni, o fatal scritto!" and double aria "Anch'io dischiuso un giorno" are fine examples of music that reflect the power and

³⁰Martin, Verdi, 99.

³¹Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 56.

³²Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:28.

³³Martin, Verdi, 101, 104.

emotional ambiguity that Verdi found for his dramatic heroine, traits that in later works would lead toward the development of the dramatic mezzo-soprano voice type.

The recitative, "Ben io t'invenni," finds Abigaille angry and vindictive, reflected in the intensity of the vocal line. At one point, Abigaille soars to a high C, only to plummet to C two octaves lower on the next count. Although extreme in range, the music of this recitative is fairly typical of Verdi's writing for the dramatic mezzo-soprano voice.

[Sing "Ben io t'invenni, o fatal scritto!"]³⁴

"Anch'io dischiuso," one of the only quiet moments for Abigaille in the entire opera, is a beautiful *cavatina* which reflects Abigaille's bitter regret over her lost love, Ismaele. This *cavatina* displays a sensuous line and elegant figuration similar in style to that of Bellini's "Casta diva."

[Play a portion of "Anch'io dischiuso"]³⁵

The *cabaletta*, "Salgo già del trono aurato," is a piece of "musical invective and belligerence" akin to Ulrica's vehemence, which reveals the driven nature of Abigaille's personality.³⁶ Charles Osborne refers to her as a "definite ancestor of Lady Macbeth,"³⁷ while Vincent Godefroy calls her "Leonora and Azucena all in one."³⁸ "Salgo già" returns

³⁴Nabucco, libretto by T. Solera, piano-vocal score (Milano: G. Ricordi and Co., 1963), 106-109.

³⁵Giuseppe Verdi, Nabucco, chorus of the Vienna State Opera and the Vienna Opera Orchestra; cond. by Lamberto Gardelli (London: Decca Records Ltd.), 1966, OSA-1382, A-4382. Abigaille is sung by Elena Suliotis, a dramatic-coloratura soprano known for her powerful interpretation of this role.

³⁶Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 56.

³⁷Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 60.

³⁸Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 1:29.

Abigaille to her earlier belligerence as seen in the opening recitative, and shows the contrasting traits in Verdi's musical style.

[Play a portion of "Salgo già del trono aurato"]³⁹

Perhaps one of the most musically underrated heroines in Verdi's operatic output is the unassuming Fenena. She has only one really important moment, her prayer, "Oh dischiuso è il firmamento." Fenena's music, unobtrusive but moving, brings a dramatic pause to the ferocity of the opera.⁴⁰ She sings without ornamentation in smooth, arched phrases, rising to a heavenly A in her last phrase. The music mirrors the humble sincerity of her character, in contrast to the monstrosity of Abigaille's.

[Sing "Oh dischiuso è il firmamento."]⁴¹

Fenena, clearly designated as a "soprano" by Verdi, leads the way toward the development of what would become the "Verdi soprano" in his later operas. In these two simple pages of music, Verdi decided the course of such later heroines as Amelia in Un ballo in maschera, Desdemona in Otello, Leonora in Il Trovatore, Elisabeth in Don Carlos, and Aïda.

³⁹Verdi, Nabucco, *ibid.* Abigaille is again sung by Elena Suliotis. Even though this is the same soprano as was heard in the previous *cavatina*, the contrast in interpretation and in vocal color used in this *cabaletta* is most striking.

⁴⁰Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 1:32.

⁴¹Nabucco, *ibid.*, 225-226.

The Prima Donna as a Dramatic Force in Macbeth

After Nabucco, Verdi had several popular successes: I Lombardi a la Prima Crociata (1843), I due Foscari (1844), Ernani (1844), Giovanna d'Arco (1845), Alzira (1845) and Attila (1846). It was with Macbeth (1847), however, that Verdi took the next stride toward dramatic truth and integrity.⁴² He became completely immersed in the entire production, insisting upon participation in the writing of the libretto as well as involvement with decisions pertaining to costumes, set design, staging, rehearsals, and so on.⁴³ Macbeth was no longer the "singers' opera"--it was Verdi's! Verdi's interest in the dramatic content of Macbeth can be seen in a letter that he wrote to Varesi concerning the interpretation of the role of Macbeth:

I'll never stop urging you to study closely the dramatic situation and the words; the music will come by itself. In a word, I would rather you served the poet than the composer.⁴⁴

Verdi also instructed Marianna Barbieri-Nini, his first Lady Macbeth, that he wanted the music "more spoken than sung."⁴⁵

⁴²Osborne, Verdi, 69: "With Macbeth Verdi had suddenly taken an immense leap forward, a leap away from the conventional demands of mid-19th century opera, towards dramatic truth and a musical style that combines psychological depth with a continuing abundance of that prolific and individual melodic gift which was never to desert him." Osborne includes this same passage almost verbatim in The Complete Operas of Verdi, 161.

⁴³When Verdi demanded yet another piano rehearsal of the second act duet just minutes before the final dress rehearsal was to begin, Felice Varesi, Verdi's first MacBeth, complained that they had sung through it at least 150 times. Verdi answered, "I wouldn't say that if I were you, for within half an hour it will be 151." Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 147-148.

⁴⁴The Verdi Companion, s.v. "Verdi's Own Words" by Martin Chusid, 184.

⁴⁵Martin, Verdi, 179.

Where Verdi was gratefully satisfied with reworked sets and costumes for Nabucco, he could not have tolerated as much for Macbeth. Where he recast the *tessitura* for sopranos who sang Cuniza after the contralto Mary Shaw had premiered it, he would not change a note of Macbeth to accommodate any singer. Verdi now expected that his musical and dramatic needs would eclipse the singer's center-stage domain. He had definite ideas for the characterization of Lady Macbeth and wanted a singer who could fill his need for a hard, ugly, hollow voice.⁴⁶ The singer would be the one to accommodate Verdi, not vice versa.

With Verdi the story of Macbeth became an exploration of the egos of Lord and Lady Macbeth.⁴⁷ Lady Macbeth is cruel, vengeful, angry, the monster behind a monster. Verdi demanded that his librettist adhere closely to the original Shakespearian play, but, for the sake of his drama, he omitted some nuances of Shakespeare's plot, including the reference that Lady Macbeth makes regarding their children.⁴⁸ Verdi did not want to allow her that human vulnerability. He also insisted that his librettist, Francesco Piave, write in shorter, eight-syllable rather than eleven-syllable lines, and that the phrase lengths

⁴⁶Verdi wrote to his librettist, Salvatore Cammarano, regarding the soprano, Eugenia Tadolini, who was to sing Lady Macbeth in Naples in 1848: "Tadolini's qualities are far too fine for this role. This may seem to you absurd, but Tadolini has a beautiful and attractive figure, and I want Lady Macbeth to be ugly and evil. Tadolini sings to perfection, and I don't want Lady Macbeth to sing at all. Tadolini has a wonderful voice, clear, flexible, strong, while Lady Macbeth's voice should be hard, stifled and dark. Tadolini's voice is angelic; I want Lady Macbeth's to be diabolic." Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 58-59.

⁴⁷Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 155.

⁴⁸In Lady Macbeth's famous speech from Act I, scene vi of the play, which begins, "Screw your courage to the sticking place," she makes reference to having suckled children. Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, ed. by Horace Howard Furness (New York: Dover Publications, 1963; reprinted from the unabridged fifth edition, London: J. B. Lippencott and Co., 1873), 108, line 63-64.

be irregular and, therefore, less poetic. He wanted to give Macbeth a more realistic pattern of speech and interchange.⁴⁹

Both "La luce langue"⁵⁰ and the sleepwalking scene⁵¹ are excellent studies of Lady Macbeth's unbalanced nature; but, it is in her drinking song, or *brindisi*, "Si colmi'il calice" that the dramatic irony of the opera and of her character come to the fore.⁵² In this scene complex, Lady Macbeth is attempting to distract her guests from their concern for her husband's state. The music is almost martial in its command, being in a strongly accented 2/4 meter rather than the 3/4 so often associated with this type of aria. Even though the melody is ornamented, there is something rather sinister about its affected lightness. The style of composition that Verdi used, especially that of contrasting extremes in *tessitura*, helped define Lady Macbeth's cruel nature.⁵³ The following example, an excerpt of "Si colmi'il calice," displays Verdi's compositional skill in creating a dramatically unbalanced character.

[Sing a portion of "Si colmi'il calice."]⁵⁴

⁴⁹Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:270-271.

⁵⁰Lady Macbeth's aria, "La luce langue" was written for the revival of Macbeth in 1865 to replace the fiery *cabaletta* "Trionfai! secure alfine." It shows Verdi's deeper understanding of the subversive, psychotic nature of Lady Macbeth as presented originally by Shakespeare. Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:269.

⁵¹Verdi wrote of the sleepwalking scene: "To copy real life may be a good thing, but to invent real life (*il vero*) is better, much better." Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 160.

⁵²Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 158.

⁵³The Verdi Companion, Celletti, 224.

⁵⁴Macbeth, libretto by Francesco Maria Piave and Andrea Maffei, piano-vocal score (New York: G. Schirmer, 1961), 133-137.

In Verdi's operas before Macbeth and since Un giorno di regno, the mezzo-soprano voice was not used as a major dramatic character, nor does it appear here. Although Verdi intended that Lady Macbeth be sung by a dramatic soprano, the role is now frequently sung by a dramatic mezzo-soprano, with a soft, high D-flat near the end of her role.

Abigaille and Lady Macbeth share certain traits which serve to symbolize their characters. For example, they sing in jagged melodies to the extremes of their ranges, with outbursts of coloratura occurring at emotionally significant moments. Although Macbeth preceded Il Trovatore by six years and Un ballo in maschera by ten years, the bases for Azucena, Verdi's first great mezzo-soprano, as well as Ulrica were laid in Abigaille and Lady Macbeth.⁵⁵

Before Il Trovatore, Verdi's Rigoletto (1851) predicted the direction the future soprano and mezzo-soprano voices were to take. In Rigoletto, Verdi employed a more progressive concept for his female characters than he had previously used. Gilda, the soprano, and Maddalena, the contralto *comprimaria*, act as important character contrasts to each other: Gilda, the refined, and Maddalena, the commoner. Gilda does not traverse into the lower part of her range; rather, that is left for Maddalena, the contralto. With Maddalena, Verdi explored the color of the contralto voice for the first time in any of his operas. In the *bel canto* tradition of Rossini, the contralto was treated as a virtuosic voice, assuming the position that the outmoded *castrati* had occupied. Instead, Verdi

⁵⁵Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:34.

treated the contralto realistically, evident in the depth of emotion that the humanistic Maddalena displays.⁵⁶

Influenced by the earlier concepts of voices in the *opera seria* and *opera buffa* genres, Gilda embodied the *buffa* mezzo-soprano characteristics of lightness and agility once found in Cuniza of Oberto and later seen in Oscar. Gilda's *fiorature*, however, are always dramatically meaningful and never intended for mere display.⁵⁷ It is with Maddalena that Verdi premiered the concept of the dramatic mezzo-soprano as he exploited the darker qualities of the contralto voice, and shifted the dramatic emphasis from the soprano *drammatico di agilit * to the mezzo-soprano voice.⁵⁸ The original Rossinian function of soprano and mezzo-soprano have been reversed in Rigoletto and the way was paved for the contrast between Leonora and Azucena.

Verdi began Il Trovatore with the contrast of Maddalena and Gilda fresh in his mind. As he enlarged and intensified the conflict of personality, and coincidentally of voice types, the soprano/mezzo-soprano dichotomy was born, whether or not Verdi identified each prima donna voice type. Verdi intended that Il Trovatore be a "two-woman opera," and presented his women as completely different types from different classes, each with her own set of moral laws, and each with her own vocal character.⁵⁹

⁵⁶Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 240, 244.

⁵⁷Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 240.

⁵⁸Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:68.

⁵⁹Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:65.

The Emergence of the Mezzo-Soprano
in Il Trovatore

Il Trovatore was the first opera Verdi had written that was not commissioned by a specific opera house. He composed Il Trovatore confident that he, Giuseppe Verdi, would be able to have his new opera produced with no trouble at all.⁶⁰ The music of Il Trovatore, like that of Macbeth and Nabucco, was labeled "music in a new style," and with it critics forecast the death of *bel canto* singing.⁶¹ Verdi himself said, ". . . as to the layout of the piece, the more unusual and bizarre the better."⁶²

Verdi was intrigued with the subject and characters of the Spanish play El Trovador by Antonio Gutiérrez and wanted to set it for the operatic stage. He was especially attracted to the character of the gypsy woman, Azucena. Once completed, Verdi presented Il Trovatore to those opera houses that employed singers suitable to his needs.⁶³

Il Trovatore was presented to the Teatro San Carlo in Naples with the stipulation that the theater engage a prima donna other than the one chosen by the management to play Azucena.⁶⁴ Verdi wanted a singer similar in voice to Rita Gabussi.⁶⁵ Gabussi was

⁶⁰Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:59.

⁶¹Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 250, 255.

⁶²Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:61.

⁶³Martin, Verdi, 295.

⁶⁴In a letter to Vincenzo Torelli in 1856 Verdi wrote: "It is not my custom to allow artists to be foisted on me, not even if Malibran were to come back into this world. Not all the money on earth would make me relinquish this principle." Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 113.

⁶⁵Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:63.

a soprano who, in a review of 1841, was called a *soprano sfogato* (flowing out or unreserved), for whom every role had to be altered significantly to suit her.⁶⁶ Due to the rather high fee that Verdi requested for the opera, San Carlo eventually refused to produce Il Trovatore.

The opera was next presented to La Fenice in Venice, with the soprano Marianna Barbieri-Nini, Verdi's first Lady Macbeth, scheduled to play Leonora.⁶⁷ Verdi was pleased with Barbieri-Nini as an actress and singer, but preferred her for Azucena rather than Leonora, and in fact, gave her a choice between the two.⁶⁸

Eventually, contract negotiations with Venice collapsed as well, so Il Trovatore was presented to the Teatro Apollo in Rome. Being satisfied with the singers for Leonora, Manrico, and Count di Luna, Verdi again requested a different prima donna for Azucena.⁶⁹

It is significant to note the care which Verdi took in attempting to find the exact artist to play Azucena. Allowing Barbieri-Nini her choice between Leonora and Azucena

⁶⁶Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:22.

⁶⁷Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:68.

⁶⁸Regarding the subject, Verdi wrote to his librettist, Francesco Piave: "Why does Barbieri undertake that part [Leonora] if it doesn't suit her? If she wants to do Il Trovatore there's another part, that of the Gipsy. Don't let's talk about the *convenienze* or say that it's a *comprimaria*, no indeed; it's a principle, the principle role; finer and more dramatic and more original than the other. If I were a prima donna (a fine thing that would be!) I would always rather sing the part of the Gipsy in Il Trovatore." Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:68.

⁶⁹In a letter to his librettist, Salvatore Cammarano, he complained, "I still haven't anyone to do Azucena--that Azucena I'm so keen on!" Having found none more suitable, Verdi eventually settled for Emilia Goggi to sing the role of Azucena. Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:61.

reinforces the fact that there was not yet a distinction between the dramatic soprano and the mezzo-soprano voice types. Verdi wanted a dramatic actress for Azucena and was not thinking in terms of vocal range or *tessitura*.⁷⁰

Although the term "mezzo-soprano" had been in use for quite some time, it still referred to a voice that was literally a "half" soprano, and was still associated with a lighter voice possessing a smaller upper range. Throughout Verdi's career, his occasional writing for sopranos below the treble clef indicated that he expected all sopranos, not just mezzo-sopranos and contraltos, to possess a lower "chest" extension.

When Verdi conceptualized the character of Azucena, her voice grew in his imagination with her personality, as had Lady Macbeth's.⁷¹ Verdi knew instinctively what kind of voice belonged to Azucena; however, he had no way to describe it other than as a "Gabussi-type voice."⁷² The need to reclassify voices by weight and color was now a stumbling-block to Verdi's explanation of his intentions for Azucena. Where and when the term "mezzo-soprano" became associated with Azucena is not known, for Verdi

⁷⁰Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:68-69.

⁷¹Julian Budden states: "From [Azucena] on, the mezzo-soprano assumed in Verdi's works the function and characteristic that he had previously associated with dramatic sopranos such as Abigail and Lady MacBeth." Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:34.

⁷²It is thought that Verdi may have been influenced by the role of Fidés, the first of the great mother figures of opera, in Meyerbeer's Le Prophète (1849) which was sung by Pauline Viardot-Garcia. Although Viardot is now recognized as a mezzo-soprano, she apparently was not a dramatic mezzo-soprano in Verdi's sense. It may have been Rita Gabussi's portrayal of Giovanna in Frederico Ricci's La Prigione di Edimburgo that most influenced Verdi's concept of Azucena. Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:69.

referred to her as a "prima donna," never following these words with either soprano or mezzo-soprano.⁷³

Azucena, Verdi's leading female character in Il Trovatore, received his greatest attention and the greatest depth of character delineation.⁷⁴ An essentially morbid character, and the forerunner of Ulrica, Azucena sings in brief, rustic phrases based on repetitions of short rhythmic patterns. Leonora, Manrico, and Count di Luna are presented in rather conventional ways while Verdi expanded Azucena's emotional range in several directions.⁷⁵ For dramatic purposes, Verdi exploited Azucena's two great passions--her love for her son and her compulsion to avenge her mother.⁷⁶

Azucena, in "Stride la vampa," immediately presents the face of a driven, compulsive beast who will stop at nothing to gain her end--revenge. Her forays into the upper register are the result of her suffering soul, as is the case with Leonora. Azucena's suffering triggers outbursts of rage, whereas Leonora's triggers self-sacrifice.

Although Verdi did not identify this role either as a soprano or a mezzo-soprano, the role of Azucena may have been the genesis of the dramatic mezzo-soprano. The aria, "Stride la vampa," shows the range, color, and drive that has come to be associated with Verdi's mezzo-sopranos.

⁷³Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 86, 104, and 112.

⁷⁴Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 250.

⁷⁵Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:70, 67.

⁷⁶Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 250.

[Sing a portion of "Stride la vampa."]⁷⁷

In the second example, "Si, la stanchezza m'opprime," the exhausted Azucena appears as Manrico's mother, a softer, more vulnerable creature, involved in sweeter thoughts of home and family. She embodies the contrast of a woman torn between the dark and the light in human nature that Verdi explored in his later operas, including La Traviata, Don Carlo, and Aïda. These two musical examples, "Stride la vampa" and "Si, la stanchezza m'opprime," clearly illustrate the ambiguity Verdi brought to the mezzo-soprano voice. In "Si, la stanchezza" the music is calmer and more controlled than in "Stride la vampa," but the vocal color is still that of a mezzo-soprano.

[Sing the duet "Si, la stanchezza m'opprime" assisted by Troy Curtis, tenor.]⁷⁸

Verdi intended that his Leonora preserve Gutiérrez's original description of that character. She was to be a high-born lady with strict ideals and a deeply religious faith who sacrifices herself for love, the ultimate mortal sin. She is a melancholic character who sings in lyrically elegant, soaring phrases that rival the melodic genius of Bellini.⁷⁹

The examples of Leonora's musical characterization show her constantly dipping into the lower extension of her range, while in the next phrase soaring upwards into the more heroic area of her voice. Her outbursts of emotion are the result of her desperate but vain attempts to change the course of destiny. She is a confused and tormented

⁷⁷Il Trovatore, libretto by S. Cammarano, piano-vocal score (New York: G. Schirmer, 1898), 56-59.

⁷⁸Il Trovatore, *ibid.*, 219-222.

⁷⁹Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:59, 70, 67.

woman who valiantly fights the flow of events that seem to be conspiring against her virtuosic nature.

Leonora does not exhibit the emotional range that is apparent in Azucena's music, but she does act as the balance to Azucena. Her soprano range and tessitura, as well as the much more lyrical elements of her musical line, as seen in "D'amor sull'ali rosee," contrast to those of Azucena. Even though she also has moments of dramatic agitation as in "Quel suon, quelle preci," they are brief and not intended to be openly aggressive.

[Play portions of Leonora's music, the aria "D'amour sull'ali rosee"⁸⁰ followed by a sung portion of "Quel suon, quelle preci."]⁸¹

The element conspicuously absent from Azucena's emotional repertoire is that of joy, displayed by Verdi's sopranos with predictable regularity through the use of the *cabaletta*. The agility of the earlier dramatic coloratura soprano has been preserved in Verdi's "new" heroine, but the vehemence has disappeared. Leonora's "Tu vedrai che'amore in terra" is an example of the exuberant energy Verdi chose to give to this soprano. In contrast, the mezzo-soprano's energy lies in her anger and vengefulness.

[Sing a portion of "Tu vedrai che'amore in terra".]⁸²

⁸⁰Leonora is sung by Zinka Milanov, a soprano who exemplifies the term "Verdi soprano." The aria is taken from the recording Milanov Sings, featuring soprano Zinka Milanov and the R.C.A. Victor Orchestra conducted by Renato Cellini (R.C.A. Victor Red Seal Records), LM-1777.

⁸¹Il Trovatore, *ibid.*, 183-184.

⁸²Il Trovatore, *ibid.*, 191-193.

Julian Budden notes, "The symmetry of the dramatic scheme [in Il Trovatore]. . . results from the tension of opposing forces held in equilibrium. . . the two forces are symbolized by the two prima donnas."⁸³ Previously, Verdi has assigned such dramatic contrasts to the male voices. It is the conflict of personalities embodied in the contrasting voice and character types that is perhaps Verdi's most important contribution to the Italian operatic tradition.⁸⁴

The dramatic conflict within Verdi's dramas manifests itself in part, in the propulsive quality of his melodies, which gave his operas a distinct forward momentum and heightened the demands on the voices.⁸⁵ George Martin states, "The melody becomes not the report of an emotion, but the emotion itself."⁸⁶ Verdi wanted the audience to hear the characters love, suffer, and die, not only in the language of the words, but also in the language of the sound carried in the voice as the singer acted and reacted within each situation.

⁸³Budden, Verdi, 221.

⁸⁴Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:34.

⁸⁵Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 2:67.

⁸⁶Martin, Verdi, 300.

Don Carlos: Eboli versus Elisabeth

Don Carlos (1867), Verdi's grand opera written for Paris, was his most ambitious and expansive work to date.⁸⁶ Based on the last of three libretti by Joseph Méry and Camille du Locle, Don Carlos was adapted from Friedrich Schiller's play Don Carlos, and was subjected to no less than four revisions of the original.⁸⁷

No matter what the edition or what cuts were imposed, Don Carlos was and is yet an opera alive with the humanity of its composer. Verdi himself must have recognized how stilted Schiller's characters seemed to be, but at every turn, Verdi managed to infuse them all with his own mark of realism.⁸⁸ Each character possesses a complete individuality which is apparent as each is involved in myriad human relationships, a dramatic situation not achieved by Verdi since Un ballo in maschera.⁸⁹ Verdi exposed his characters' private emotions while simultaneously acknowledging their public worlds.⁹⁰

⁸⁶Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:5.

⁸⁷The five versions of Don Carlos are as follows:

1. The 1866 original version in French.
2. The 1867 performance version for Paris consisting of five acts and a ballet.
3. The 1872 version for Naples in Italian with only slight alterations.
4. The 1884 version for Milan in four acts without the ballet.
5. The 1886 version called the "Modena amalgam" published by Ricordi as a "new edition in five acts without the ballet." Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:39.

⁸⁸Osborne, Verdi, 198.

⁸⁹Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:157. The title in French is Don Carlos and in Italian, Don Carlo.

⁹⁰Martin, Verdi, 422.

Don Carlos was written for and premiered at the Paris Opéra, an association which had proved quite troublesome to Verdi.⁹¹ For the Italian premiere of Don Carlo, Verdi requested two *prime donne di gran cartello*⁹² who were great actresses and who would be able to interpret his score accurately.⁹³ For the grand conflict between Eboli and Elisabeth, mezzo-soprano and soprano, it was essential that the vocal forces be equal, for this was to be the first time in Verdi's writing that he places two strong-willed women in direct opposition to each other. Not since his first, discarded opera Rochester,⁹⁴ had Verdi written a duet for two women, and it was not until Aïda that he was at last successful in this vocal confrontation.⁹⁵ The original fourth-act duet between Elisabeth and

⁹¹In a letter to Camille du Locle years after the Paris premiere of Don Carlos, Verdi referred to the French manner of operatic production as a process of "mosaics" in which everyone from the chorus master to the stage manager had a say in the final outcome of the work rendering the performance dull and uninspired. Verdi complained that Don Carlos had been pulled after just twelve performances, when in fact there had been forty-three, and he vowed not to write another opera for Paris unless he would have control over every aspect of its production. Verdi said, "One will alone will have to prevail: mine!" Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 151-152.

⁹²Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:27. The phrase translates as "first ladies of great reputation."

⁹³In 1868, Verdi wrote to Giulio Ricordi:
"Tell me about the quality and the power of their voices, about their style of singing, their enunciation and above all about their acting. . . ." The Verdi Companion, Chusid, 179.

In 1879, he wrote to Franco Faccio concerning the parts of Philip and Eboli in particular: "You need seasoned artists who are actors above all, not novices. . . ." ibid., 149.

And in 1883, Verdi wrote to Giulio Ricordi:
"Don't tell me the singers have been studying the opera and that they know it. I don't believe any of it. Two things they certainly don't know: clear enunciation and how to keep in time, qualities essential in Don Carlos, more so than in any of my other operas. . . ." Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 221.

⁹⁴Rochester is thought to have been Verdi's first commissioned opera. It is possible that some of its music found its way into Oberto. Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 1:26.

⁹⁵Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:166.

Eboli was ultimately eliminated⁹⁶ and replaced by a scene in which the emotional restraint evidenced by both women may have been ultimately more effective than any vocal confrontation could have been.⁹⁷

Although Schiller presented Elisabeth as "little more than a plaster saint," Verdi gave her moments of great dramatic importance.⁹⁸ Elisabeth's aria "Tu che la vanità" gives her the opportunity to reveal a deeper side of her nature. Having suffered long enough, she takes her ground, establishing herself as the heroic creature, full of idealism and defiance.⁹⁹ Her phrases span a wide range; the second of some pairs of phrases soar higher than the first at dramatic moments, perhaps suggesting Elisabeth's triumph of determination over despair.¹⁰⁰ Elisabeth is no longer the defenseless young bride of a powerful king, she is now the commander of her fate, the daughter of a queen, and the spiritual mother of Aïda.¹⁰¹ The quality and style of writing in "Tu che la vanità" effectively captures Verdi's heroic concept for the prima donna voice, while at the same time, exposing her vulnerability.

⁹⁶This may have been due to the professional rivalry between Marie-Constance Sass, Verdi's first Elisabeth, and Pauline Gueymard, his first Eboli. Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:23.

⁹⁷Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:166.

⁹⁸Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:13, 136.

⁹⁹Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:168.

¹⁰⁰Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:144, 146.

¹⁰¹Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:168.

[Sing a portion of "Tu che la vanità"]¹⁰²

Verdi felt that Eboli, after the role of Philip, was the most important character in Don Carlos. She was a person of great charm and passion, willful and proud, who serves her vanity with the same fervor that Elisabeth serves her religion.¹⁰³ Although premiered by a soprano,¹⁰⁴ Eboli, like Azucena before her, was the kind of ambivalent character that was best served by the mezzo-soprano voice.¹⁰⁵

Verdi marked the distinction between the soprano and the mezzo-soprano by utilizing the characteristics of a more dramatic tonal color in the mezzo-soprano's lower range along with the ringing quality of her high notes.¹⁰⁶ The mezzo-soprano was no longer the light, agile, superficial creature of past conventions. She had become an individual of great emotion, the antagonist to everything honorable in the drama.

Eboli's final aria, "O don fatale," revised three times before Pauline Gueymard premiered it, preserved the contralto notes of "Oh mia regina" which Gueymard could

¹⁰²Don Carlo, libretto by Joseph Méry and Camille du Locle, piano-vocal score (New York: G. Schirmer, 1958), 279-281.

¹⁰³Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:13, 136.

¹⁰⁴The role of Eboli presents some challenging moments for even the best of singers. In Paris, Verdi had considerable casting problems. The original Eboli, contralto Rosine Bloch, was pulled from the cast by the director of the Opéra, Emile Perrin, and replaced by Pauline Gueymard, a soprano of considerable range. Perrin assured Verdi that Gueymard would be able to handle the role with no changes in tessitura, but once rehearsals began, Verdi soon realized this would not be the case. Eboli's first aria, "The Song of the Veil," was raised a full step, extended to include a second verse, and various soprano flourishes were added, including five alternate cadenzas and a new final phrase. Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:21-22.

¹⁰⁵Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:14.

¹⁰⁶The Verdi Companion, Celletti, 231.

sing, while extending the range to an high C-flat. Verdi also included a soprano cadenza for Gueymard that remains unpublished.

The role of Eboli creates an enigma for the dramatic mezzo-soprano who is essentially singing a contralto role adapted for the soprano range. No matter what the revision, Eboli should be presented as a despicable character of limitless vanity.¹⁰⁷ Verdi called Eboli a *coquine* or harlot, who, Vincent Godefroy says vacillates between "princess, actress, adventuress, mistress, and tigress."¹⁰⁸

In the aria, "O don fatale," the emotional ambiguity Verdi created in the mezzo-soprano voice is quite apparent. The aria opens with Eboli cursing the fatal gift of her own beauty. This musical example, beginning with "Oh mia Regina," finds Eboli contrite as she sings of the wrongs she had brought upon the queen, rousing sympathy in the audience.¹⁰⁹ With a sudden burst of remorse, however, Eboli resolves to undue the wrong, save Carlo, and find redemption.

[Sing a portion of "O don fatale"]¹¹⁰

All of this is quite uncharacteristic of Eboli, who had to this point, been a purely hedonistic woman. In earlier operas, this outburst would have been the logical place for

¹⁰⁷Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:22, 136, 100.

¹⁰⁸Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:149.

¹⁰⁹Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:166.

¹¹⁰Don Carlo, *ibid.*, 239-242.

the required *cabaletta*. But Verdi, with his concept of integrated music-drama was no longer tied to such past conventions.

As Verdi preserved Elisabeth's gift of kindness, sense of duty, and thirst for God which caused Eboli so much jealous consternation, so too did he preserve Schiller's qualities of pride and vanity in Eboli. Eboli refers to Elisabeth as that "new saint" who would "sup at both tables."¹¹¹ In Eboli's confrontation scene with Carlo, Verdi combined the "cajoling manner" of Lady Macbeth with a certain "feline agility," which gives a very strong premonition of the future Amneris.¹¹² In the end, Eboli's will cannot triumph over Elisabeth's because her goals are those of human ambitions,¹¹³ while Elisabeth maintains the nobler ideals of duty to God, family, and country.¹¹⁴ These same features are present in the noble *Aïda*.

Aïda: The War of the Prima Donnas

Aïda, considered by some to be Verdi's most original opera, still conformed to the rules and traditions of French grand opera as seen in *Don Carlos*. In one sense, *Aïda* is

¹¹¹Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3:39, 73, 99, 109.

¹¹²Godefroy, *The Dramatic Genius of Verdi*, 2:157.

¹¹³Godefroy, *The Dramatic Genius of Verdi*, 2:138.

¹¹⁴Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3:145.

a classical drama because it embraces the theme of love versus duty. Verdi's treatment of this central theme, however, is entirely new.¹¹⁵

In Aïda, Verdi presented an extraordinarily lavish spectacle at the same time that he preserved the essence of each character's intimately human conflicts.¹¹⁶ Verdi was far more successful with the balance that he struck within and between the characterization of his two heroines in Aïda, Amneris and Aïda, mezzo-soprano and soprano, than he had been with Eboli and Elisabeth in Don Carlos. Here, Verdi more effectively illustrated the opposing forces of private feelings and patriotic duty.¹¹⁷

Verdi was more involved in the construction of the libretto for Aïda that he had been for any of his other operas. Antonio Ghislanzoni, the librettist for Aïda, at first suggested that the opera be written to a French text, but Verdi refused, saying that Italian was a better choice for Aïda. Verdi corresponded at great length with Ghislanzoni, criticizing such things as his phrasing and the number of syllables per line that he used; and, Verdi especially stressed the importance of what he called the "theatrical" effect.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:208.

¹¹⁶Osborne, The Complete Operas of Verdi, 393.

¹¹⁷Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:197.

¹¹⁸In a letter to Ghislanzoni Verdi said, "If the action calls for it, I would immediately abandon rhythm, rhyme and stanza. I would use blank verse in order to be able to say clearly and distinctly what the action requires. Unfortunately, it is sometimes necessary in the theatre for poets and composers to have the talent not to write either poetry of music." Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 159.

Verdi was so adamant about his ideas that he himself composed the simple poetry for the final duet between Aïda and Radamès.¹¹⁹

To some extent, each character of Aïda, with the possible exception of Amneris, represents a standard operatic personality. Aïda is the self-sacrificing heroine; Ramphis, the primitive ritualizer; Radamès, the patriotic hero, and so on.¹²⁰ At the same time, Verdi endowed each character with a certain vulnerability that created its individual humanity. Unlike the heroines of Don Carlos, both Amneris and Aïda present ambivalent figures caught between love and hate, pride and compassion, duty and desire. Verdi clearly expressed their instability through his skillful musical characterization.

The confrontation scene between these two very powerful women is a first for Verdi, one which gave him the opportunity to explore the duplicity of the two female characters. At first, Aïda is the victim, trapped by circumstances beyond her control, while Amneris is the cunning serpent, patronizing and commanding Aïda into submission.¹²¹ There are parallels in the personalities of Eboli and Amneris, such as the coaxing tone that both women employ; however, Eboli has far more power than Amneris. Eboli is able to disrupt an entire nation; Amneris can only humiliate her slave girl.¹²² For a brief instant after Aïda realizes she has been compromised, she flashes her anger at Amneris,

¹¹⁹Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 156-161, 162-167.

¹²⁰Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:258.

¹²¹Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:155, 192-194.

¹²²Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:198, 205, 218, 220.

and the two forces are equal. Amneris, however, is determined to defeat Aïda, and her brutal tirade continues, forcing Aïda to grovel at her feet.

In Verdi's correspondence with Drahnet Bey, the intendant of the Cairo Opera House where Aïda was premiered, Verdi indicated that he wanted two first-class female singers for the roles of Aïda and Amneris. However, when he spoke of Aïda, he seemed to be as concerned with Aïda's appearance as he was with the quality of her voice.¹²³ Among Verdi's casting choices for Aïda was Adelina Patti, a singer known for her virtuosity in the lighter repertoire. Even so, Verdi had not placed such faith in the scope of the soprano voice since Abigaille of Nabucco.¹²⁴

For the role of Amneris, Verdi was once again dissatisfied with the available voices, as he had been during his search for the voice to fit Azucena. His letters to Giulio Ricordi, Ghislanzoni, and Drahnet Bey reflect his frustration over this dilemma. He wanted a warm and loving warrior-maiden who was able to sing voluptuously and who was able to act with great dramatic feeling.¹²⁵ Verdi was looking for a voice with a certain color and weight that he considered to be his "mezzo-soprano." Without a single aria, Amneris steals every scene in which she appears. She is one of the greatest personalities of the operatic world.¹²⁶

¹²³Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 170-171, 177.

¹²⁴Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:259, 208.

¹²⁵Verdi said, "Voice alone is not enough for this role." He also complained, "Neither Sass nor Grossi will ever be mezzo-sopranos. . ." and finally, "The role of Amneris may be a little too high for Grossi, [but that is better than] risking a new singer." Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 156-159, 178-180.

¹²⁶Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:215.

Verdi had Eboli's entrance in mind for Amneris's first scene of the opera, but he refrained from giving Amneris the same sort of ornate aria.¹²⁷ Verdi wished to depict Amneris as a seductive, confident creature, in control of her world. Here Verdi laid the foundation that would ultimately allow him to render her an anguished, broken woman.¹²⁸

In her confrontation scene with Radamès, Amneris runs the emotional gamut from despair to hope; tenderness to fury. The same creative genius that brought the tormented soul of Azucena to life also spawned the tragic temperament of Amneris.¹²⁹ Verdi designed the opening music to act four as a reinforcement of the dark highlights of the mezzo-soprano voice, then proceeded to give Amneris an emotional range which surpasses that of Aïda.¹³⁰

The following musical examples lifted from the duet will illustrate the dramatic force of Amneris's emotional depth and ambiguity. In the first section, from "io l'amo, io l'amo sempre" to Radamès' musical entrance, Verdi continued to exploit the range and color of the mezzo-soprano voice while he simultaneously assigned it the lyricism and phrase movement that he usually associated with the soprano voice.

[Sing from "Io l'amo, io l'amo sempre" to Radamès' musical entrance]¹³¹

¹²⁷In a letter to Ghislanzoni, Verdi stated, "I am not averse to cabalettas; but I must have a situation that gives a reason for them." Osborne, Letters of Giuseppe Verdi, 161.

¹²⁸Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:184, 190, 191.

¹²⁹Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:207.

¹³⁰Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:203.

¹³¹Aïda, libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni, piano-vocal score (New York: G. Schirmer, 1963), 259-261.

After Amneris offers to save Radamès from his certain death, he rejects her completely, and she is reduced to uncontrolled pleading. In "Ah! tu dei vivere!" she offers him her throne, her country, and her very life if he will only love her. The desperation shown in this next example is similar in style to that found in parallel circumstances for the soprano heroine.

[Sing "Ah! tu dei vivere!" to Radamès' next entrance]¹³²

Once again Radamès refuses Amneris, stating his love for Aïda, which throws Amneris into a rage. She vows to destroy him as her pride speaks of vengeance, "la vendetta." In this excerpt, it can be seen that Verdi returned to the more vehement type of writing that he had come to associate with the mezzo-soprano voice.

[Sing "Chi ti salva, sciagurato" to end of section]¹³³

By the end of the duet, Amneris is a desperate, defeated woman, unable to accept Radamès rejection but unwilling to let him die.¹³⁴ Amneris finally has resorted to the type of hysterical outbursts Verdi gave to the tormented Azucena.¹³⁵

Just as Verdi defined the agony of Amneris with the fourth act duet, so he also created a similar conflict for Aïda with "Ritorna vincitor." Where Amneris's plight is the result of her complete self-involvement, Aïda's aria becomes the expression of a mind

¹³²Aïda, *ibid.*, 265, 266.

¹³³Aïda, *ibid.*, 272-273.

¹³⁴Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:208.

¹³⁵Budden, The Operas of Verdi, 3:252.

caught in a much more solemn predicament. "Ritorna vincitor" is a brilliant piece of declamatory lyricism, perhaps the only aria in operatic history known by the first line of its powerful recitative.¹³⁶

In Aïda, Verdi chose to bring the first act to a close with a stroke of great dramatic foresight. Rather than the standard *cavatina-cabaletta* combination so often employed as an exit aria for the soprano, Verdi designed Aïda's aria in five distinct sections, each growing and developing toward the next. The aria unfolds as follows:

The opening recitative, "Ritorna vincitor," presents the essence of Aïda's conflict. She is questioning her allegiance--is she loyal to her people or to her lover.

"L'insana parole" brings her to the anguished decision that she must first be her father's daughter. She then calls for the annihilation of Egypt.

Aïda again realizes that the destruction of Egypt means the destruction of Radamès and she expresses her sorrow in "e l'amor mio?"

With "I sacri nomi" Aïda voices her desperate confusion as she realizes that it is not possible for her to make such a profound decision.

The final section, "Numi pietà," is an elegantly simple prayer in which she pleads for her agonizing to end.

[Sing "Ritorna vincitor"]¹³⁷

With Aïda, Verdi instituted a rivalry between the soprano and mezzo-soprano voice types that set an historical precedence. Not only had Verdi established the heroic character of each woman, but he also borrowed traits from each to help define the power

¹³⁶Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:187-188.

¹³⁷Aida, *ibid.*, 52-59.

of the other. In expressing her love to Radamès, for example, Amneris takes on the tenderness of her "sister," a term that Amneris once used in reference to Aïda. Aïda, in turn, assumes the cold enticement of Amneris when attempting to gain military secrets from Radamès.¹³⁸ In the characterization of his women in the opera Aïda, Verdi gave Aïda a dark side which balanced her equally with Amneris, with whom he had endowed the frailty of hopeless love. Celletti says, Verdi reached "psychological truth by a basically realistic imitation of human passions."¹³⁹

Conclusion

A line of ascendancy for the female voice types can be traced from Verdi's earliest operas, Oberto, Un giorno di regno, and Nabucco through Macbeth, Rigoletto, Il Trovatore, and Un ballo in maschera and into his later works, Don Carlos and Aïda.

The type of vocal writing that reflected the vehemence and evil that Verdi assigned to the *drammatico di agilità* soprano voice type of Abigaille in Nabucco and Lady Macbeth led to the development of the dramatic mezzo-soprano. The birth of the "Verdi mezzo-soprano" can at first be seen in Maddelena of Rigoletto, which grew in Azucena of Il Trovatore, and solidified in the character of Ulrica of Un ballo in maschera. The

¹³⁸Godefroy, The Dramatic Genius of Verdi, 2:205.

¹³⁹The Verdi Companion, Celletti, 238.

dramatic mezzo-soprano line found its greatest expression in Eboli of Don Carlos, and Amneris of Aïda.

The lyric mezzo-soprano of the Rossinian *buffa* tradition, as seen in Verdi's Cuniza of Oberto, was passed on in part to Gilda of Rigoletto with her adolescent innocence; was exploited in the character of Oscar of Un ballo; appeared in other operatic figures such as Violetta in the first act of La Traviata; resurfaced in nearly its original form with Preziosilla of La forza del destino; and made a final showing in the ladies of Falstaff. The Oscar character epitomizes the ebullient, flippant energy of earlier heroines such as Rosina of Il Barbiere di Siviglia. In Verdi's operas, however, the lyric coloratura mezzo-soprano was not the heroine, as she had been in the operas of Rossini, but she became important as the antithesis to the true Verdi heroine, the soprano. Either the heroine herself embraces aspects of Oscar to serve as a point of conflict within herself, as with Violetta of La Traviata; or the heroine is made to appear more sanctimonious by the presence of a more flamboyant personality, as with Preziosilla in La forza del destino. Verdi accepted this earlier voice type and did little to develop it further.

The significance of Fenena of Nabucco as the starting place for the Verdi heroine has not yet been fully recognized. The references to her music as "pretty, but rather insignificant" fail to give credit to Fenena, a soprano, as the role model for later heroic martyrs. Most often portrayed by a *spinto* soprano voice, this singer must carry a tone full of pathos and tragedy that is able to sustain long, weeping phrases with seeming ease of production. The "Verdi soprano" was also expected to possess the flexibility associated

with the earlier soprano types. Included in this line are heroines such as Leonora of Il Trovatore, the mature Violetta of La Traviata, Amelia of Un ballo in maschera, Leonora of La forza del destino, Elisabeth of Don Carlos, and Aïda.

Therefore, in the early operas of Verdi, the characteristics that defined the dramatic soprano voice led to the development of the dramatic mezzo-soprano voice toward the end of his career. The soprano character type who eventually became the heroine of Verdi's operas, was more related in spirit to Fenena, originally written in the mezzo-soprano range, than she was to the earlier dramatic soprano heroines. And ultimately, the prima donna mezzo-soprano of the earlier Rossinian tradition appeared only occasionally in later works.

These voice types as Verdi defined them continued to influence contemporary and subsequent Italian opera composers. For example, the leading female voice types in the operas of Giacomo Puccini (1859-1924) are fundamentally the same as those in the mature works of Verdi. Puccini and other composers of his time are importantly indebted to Verdi for his contributions to the female voice classifications. Through more than fifty years of operatic exploration and discovery, Verdi successfully had redefined the meaning of the terms "prima donna soprano" and "prima donna mezzo-soprano" to suit the dramatic needs of his operas, both for himself and for those who were to follow.

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