

**“Un bacio”—ancora?**

**Un *altro* “bacio”!**

Giuseppe Verdi was already highly accomplished when he began to write operas, yet he continued to develop as a dramatic composer his whole life. An essential element in that development was that he strove to overcome the limitations of numbers insofar as they interfered with the larger dramatic and musical structure of an opera.<sup>1</sup> From early in his career (certainly by the 1850s, the decade of *Luisa Miller* and *La traviata*), he was blurring the transitions between recitative and aria, eliding the ends of numbers, and reprising music for dramatic effect. It is true that as late as *Otello*, numbers are distinguishable; they are, however, submerged in the flow of the drama so much so that the description “through-composed” can be said to apply equally well to the works of Verdi and Wagner.<sup>2</sup>

Up to a point, a shift of compositional focus from numbers to acts and to the work as a whole has a dramatic justification, but the concomitant increase in musical unity raises the question as to whether it has a musical justification, as well. This makes it hard to avoid the old conundrum concerning the role of music in opera: Is it the case after all is said and done that the music is there merely to enhance the drama? It is a commonplace that it does so, and it seems self-evident that it must. When the question is examined, most of the time two roles for the music are thought largely to exhaust the possibilities. First, locally, the music is said to heighten the emotional effect of the words, making sad words sadder and happy words happier—or at times to add depth of meaning by undercutting the emotion of the words or by reminding the audience of something that puts the words in a different light (which can have the effect of revealing what the character is thinking). Occasionally, the music might rise to the status of commentary, but such a role remains essentially dramatic. At most, the music might be said to interpret the

1. This paper was delivered in abbreviated form at the Second International Schenker Symposium, at the Mannes College of Music in New York (March 27–29, 1992).

2. See James A. Hepokoski, *Giuseppi Verdi: “Otello,”* Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1989), 139ff. [1989a].

words as an actor or director does, supplying the “reading” of the lines, the play of intonation and the pace. Second, because it seems obvious that the music must gain its structure, and thus its meaning, from the dramatic arc rather than vice versa, it therefore serves to enhance the salience of key points in that arc—making the climax more climactic and so on. Thus, the dramatic elements of opera are apparently more basic. Even leitmotifs, supposedly the most integrally musical of operatic elements, are no more than signs that stand for dramatic characters and themes. It is the interplay of those dramatic elements that is fundamental and must subvene any musical interactions or transformations.

If the music in an opera has significance beyond being “incidental,” however, it seems that there ought to be strictly *musical* elements—and to go further, musical *processes*—more integral to the workings of an opera than those just outlined. It has often been asserted that the use of certain keys exemplifies the first possibility. Proponents of this view sometimes allow that the identity of a key has to be projected in some compositional way—through the use of motives, for example—but of course that begs the question how much of the work is being done by identity of key. Moreover, it can be objected that the use of certain keys is simply a more abstract form of the same sort of semiotic system as leitmotifs. Composers also have to change keys for mundane reasons, such as to accommodate the limitations (or exploit the strengths) of a certain singer—as in Verdi’s change of the act 2 quartet in *Otello* from B to B $\flat$ .<sup>3</sup> Still, some

3. Ibid., pp. 53–55, 66–68, 153–55; and his “Verdi’s Composition of *Otello*: The Act II Quartet,” [1989b] in *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner*, Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, eds. (Berkeley, 1989), 125–49. In their introduction to the volume in which James Hepokoski discusses these issues in connection with *Otello*, the editors describe him as “gently” advising against reading too much into key choice (p.19), though in his chapter he makes the good point that the quartet leaves one web of motivic and key relationships only perforce to enter another. This may seem to open the door to the problem of “overdetermination,” for which many forms of analysis from psychoanalysis to Schenkerian analysis are sometimes taken to task. However, whether or not this sort of supersaturation of meaning applies to *life*, it is practically a definition of *art*, particularly in the case of large-scale works. My point (and I think Hepokoski’s also) is that key should not be used without some other links, and that in such a tonally free genre as

quite suggestive observations concerning the thematic use of certain keys have been made in connection with *Otello*. Bruce Archibald was the first to mention the parallel uses of D $\flat$  minor when, according to the stage directions, the sky clears and stars appear (before the “bacio” in act 1), and when the Pleiades are mentioned at the end of the act (David Lawton also noted this).<sup>4</sup>

Some critics have tried to find a higher musical unity corresponding to the dramatic unity—for instance, through motivic transformation (that is, the compositional manipulation of motives to draw connections beyond the simple *identity* of leitmotifs). Frits Noske’s attempts to show motivic transformations in *Otello* have unfortunately managed to combine being reductive and, to the extent that they are convincing, pretty superficial.<sup>5</sup> (It would be premature, however, to ignore the potential of transformation of motives, for I think it is possible to avoid what Roger Parker and Matthew Brown dubbed *Noskerismo*.)<sup>6</sup> Aside from motivic transformation, among distinctly musical processes that come to mind with the potential to allow the music to be integral and an equal structural partner with the drama are variation and other forms of recomposition, and hidden motivic repetitions, including expansion. These are processes whereby music

---

opera, a single chord should not be taken out of context to relate to the use of its key elsewhere. (Then again, it *is* hard to resist hearing the lurid E major  $\text{\textcircled{5}}$  embellishing the tonic, C major, at the end of act 3 as a reference to that important key, or at least as a reversal of the relationship that we hear between the two chords at the end of the “bacio.”)

4. Bruce Archibald, “Tonality in *Otello*,” *The Music Review*, 35 (1974), 23–28; David Lawton, “On the ‘Bacio’ Theme in *Otello*,” *19th-Century Music*, I (1978), 211–20; see also Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. 3 (London, 1981), and Hepokoski, loc. cit. and passim. Lawton, Hepokoski, and Parker and Brown (see n.6, below), are referred to a number of times below.

5. Frits Noske, “*Otello* : Drama Through Structure,” in *The Signifier and the Signified* (The Hague, 1977), pp. 133–70.

6. Roger Parker and Matthew Brown, “*Ancora un bacio*: Three Scenes from Verdi’s *Otello*,” *19th-Century Music*, IX/1 (Summer 1985), 50–62.

might not be limited to association with words but give words meanings they could not otherwise have.

Despite the potential pitfall of a tendency to will connections where there are none (which can often be unconscious and difficult to recognize), few would deny that *Otello* seems more unified than most of Verdi's earlier works; it ought to be possible to discover the source of that impression. The most obvious unifying element is the return of the "bacio" theme in act 4, but it is hard to see how recapitulation by itself can lend such a strong sense of unity and why the use of the technique in *Otello* seems such an advance over Verdi's earlier used of it.<sup>7</sup> Suppose, however, that when the "bacio" comes back, it is not mere recapitulation but the culmination of a process that begins with the first note of the opera and ties together many dramatic and musical elements: the overwhelming sense of unity it seems to confer would have a clear source. Not that unity is the only or even the highest goal of any work of art, but pure diversity is less likely to provide a satisfying esthetic experience than an artful mixture of unity and diversity. The mixture also gives a much better illusion of reality, because, after all, we experience life both as "just one thing after another" (diversity) and as cause and effect (unity).

Schenkerian analysis has been accused of seeking only to impose unity, but at its best it is, I believe, an approach to music peculiarly able to deal with the play of diversity within unity. (The vexed issue of whether or not the unity is a fixed structure need not concern us here.) A Schenkerian approach to the opera does not guarantee that one will find a higher unity any more than any other analytical approach can—no approach *ought* to guarantee anything of the sort, in any case. Schenkerian analysis has two advantages, however: first, generally, it forces attention to the details of what we actually hear in the music; second, specifically, it can reveal relationships hidden by foreground detail—in other words, what we hear but are not always consciously aware of. The *theoretical* project would thus be to analyze the music first; once that was accomplished the analytical results could be tested against the dramatic structure to see how the musical structure interacts with the drama. Though it seems unlikely, it is

7. Joseph Kerman, "Verdi's Use of Recurring Themes," in *Studies in Music History: Essays for Oliver Strunk*, Harold Powers, ed. (Princeton, 1968), 495–510.

conceivable that the musical structure exists simply to make the music convincing per se as it does its “real” work of adding to the drama the sorts of enhancements mentioned previously. (For example, a phrase whose dramatic function was to make sad words sadder might have the harmonic structure I–II–V–I purely to make it normatively tonal; the “sadness” might come from its being in a minor key and deploying such minor-key attributes as the half step between  $\hat{5}$  and  $\hat{6}$ .) It is also the case, alas, that the choice of what to analyze is necessarily conditioned by dramatic considerations, so the *critical* project upon which the theoretical project relies would require the assumption of the analytic hypotheses supposedly to be tested. Such circularity seems unavoidable.

This paper goes through *Otello* from the beginning, attempting to glean salient features of the music. Because I know how the story (of this paper, that is) will come out, I follow Chekhov’s law of concision (“the revolver in the desk drawer”), and only those details that play a part in its denouement are included. Because the reader will be asked to track a number of musical entities (“motives”), I have found it clearest to treat them, for the most part, one by one rather than taking a strictly chronological approach; but they are introduced and numbered in the order that they appear in the opera. The long-range focus is on the “bacio” theme for reasons that I hope do not need to be justified at great length: its recapitulation is undoubtedly a highly salient feature of the music. I do want to show its *musical* justification, however, because I am convinced that its powerful dramatic impact is based on its role in the musical structure and not the other way around. The act of setting forth my analytical findings will also unavoidably introduce a distortion as to how they were arrived at; this may be clarified by contrasting analysis with scientific investigation. In science, data are collected, and a testable pattern emerges (hypothesis) and is subjected to experiment. One hopes that the pattern, if not disproved, corresponds to the structure of the phenomenon under investigation. In contrast to the scientific method, one doesn’t know how one arrives at analytical insights because, as distinguished from science, all analysis is really self-analysis; that is, the datum of critical thought is already an associational structure that needs only to be brought to light. This is why hypothesis formation, while it is an element of the analysis, is not central to it (and can in fact represent a danger by evoking willed connections). With analysis, the structure, once discovered, is what one is looking for; it doesn’t require to be tested. So

the presentation of analytical findings only need be a plausible reconstruction of how the associational structure came into being. The question of whether the structure set forth corresponds to the structure of the music is unanswerable, but it is also well-nigh meaningless. Much can be made of the doubt that arises as a result of this situation. Apart from some rather jejune fun at the expense of those who naïvely assume the correspondence, however, little is to be gained from a skeptical approach in the case of analysis for the same reason that hypothesis—and therefore *falsification*—plays such a small role in it.

The first example is a table showing the main motives that come together in the final “bacio.” I use the term *motive* to mean (as one of the earliest citations in the *OED* has it) the “smallest musical idea.” A nontheorist friend to whom I was explaining the gist of this article asked if I was talking about what the rock musicians she knows call “hooks”; this is not entirely off the mark. The table is not an exhaustive listing of important motives in the opera: for example, “È un’indra fosca, livida” does not appear here; if it has any connection to the “bacio,” it is a remote one. The numbering of the motives is simply based on the order in which they appear in the score; the grouping of the first three as I, Ia, and Ib, is intended to suggest that these are less discrete than the others. (In fact, I believe all the motives listed here have a common ultimate source but leave this aside as speculation that I cannot at present adequately support.) Characters or dramatic themes are also listed with each motive. In the course of this article, I touch on some of the ways Verdi underlined the many verbal associations in Boito’s tightly constructed libretto.

**MOTIVE NUMBER I** would not usually be called a motive because what is essential to it is the simple identity of its two pitches, F and E. I am not going to pick out every instance of an E with an F nearby, for most such cases have little significance, of course; but the prominence of these two pitches at important dramatic junctures is intriguing, particularly at the beginnings and endings of the acts, but also Otello’s first entrance, the act 1 love duet, and Desdemona’s death in act 4. Example 2 graphs the opening of act 1 through the “Esultate.” The relationship between F and E is prominent in the outer voices

on several structural levels. The structure is tonally open, but though on the surface it may seem to drift through a number of keys, the first part of the scene can be analyzed in D minor until the tonicization, for Otello's entrance, of C# major (properly D $\flat$  because the two keys share the same pitch, F, as  $\hat{3}$ ). The example traces the elaboration of the structure from the background to near the foreground, showing how the change of key implies voice-leading parallels the breaking up of which in part occasions the composing-out of D minor. The modulation represents something analogous to a "shift of focus" whereby the characteristic diminished 4th of D minor, C#–F, is reinterpreted as the characteristic major 3rd of D $\flat$  major, and F–E,  $\hat{3}$ – $\hat{2}$  in D minor, are reinterpreted as F and F $\flat$  (spelled E# and E $\flat$ ), major and minor  $\hat{3}$  of D $\flat$ . This harmonic reinterpretation undercuts for me what some feel is Otello's only moment of pure glory: The music makes the hero seem somewhat hysterical—although his excitement is understandable (and realistic), given his victory, his moment of triumph is tainted.

The two systems below example 2 (part 1), d, present more detailed and somewhat abstract models of the voice leading from the initial D minor harmony to the C minor of vocal score pages 7–9. Note especially the contrapuntal interpretations of the surface tonicizations—B $\flat$  minor and C minor in particular. The C minor functions as part of the preparation of V/V, like the more common augmented 6th arrived at through an exchange of voices (see the small staff above ex.2d). The middleground voice leading of the opening, through the "Esultate," is graphed in part 2 of example 2.<sup>8</sup> Other prominent uses of motive I are listed in the table, example 1.

**MOTIVE Ia** also comprises the relationship between two specific pitches, G# and G $\flat$ , but it has a wider application because it exemplifies a technique: the cross relation. Example 3, which graphs the "Esultate" in greater detail, shows that G#–G $\flat$ (F $\times$ ) accompanies the E#–E $\flat$  (i.e., motive I) in 3rds. The victory chorus that follows is in a mixture of E major and minor and naturally makes much of shifts from G# to G $\flat$  and back. Example 3 also shows that the melody of the "Esultate," which starts in C# major, was prefigured—a half-step higher in D minor—by the middleground unfoldings in the

8. Cf. Parker and Brown, ex.1 (p.52).

upper voice of the beginning (shown on the second system below ex.2d). This supports the connection of the keys of the two passages, which are usually thought of as distant. Besides  $G\sharp-G\flat$ , other cross relations heighten the drama: at the end of the “Credo,” for example, and when Otello curses Desdemona after the concertato in act 3 breaks off. Perhaps the most striking use of motive *Ia* in the opera takes place in act 4, and invokes motive *I*, as well, in the form  $F-F\flat$  (spelled  $F-E$ ): the cross relation from the high notes at the end of the “Ave Maria” to the low notes accompanying Otello’s entrance (so that the same cross relation figures in both his first and last entrance).

**MOTIVE *Ib*.** In the first presentation of motive *Ia* there is a more conventionally motivic aspect, a descending motion through an 8ve; this constitutes motive *Ib*. It is usually a scale from  $\hat{5}$  to  $\hat{5}$ , often arriving on  $\hat{6}$  as an upper neighbor before completion and in many cases accompanied by the prolongation of a minor harmony. This motive is associated with verbal images clustered around the sea and its perils. Some of the many uses of this motive are listed in the table: First is the *drowning* of the Turks in the “Esultate.” (This was adumbrated verbally and as a musical gesture by Jago’s aside shortly before, and it is extended to two 8ves in the victory chorus that follows. However, Jago’s aside is not *motivically* related—even given my flexible use of the term—because it unfolds a diminished 7th chord.) Next, in Jago’s first arioso, the descending scale is associated with untying the “fragile *knot* of a woman’s vow”—think what that image could mean to a sailor. During the *brindisi*, *Ib* is sung by Cassio: “The [wine] beclouds my mind with lovely mists.” Jago, again the man of the sea, responds to this with talk of “taking the bait.” In the love duet, *Ib* sets Otello’s words “Let war thunder and the world be *engulfed*”; when he says, “Let death take me . . . in the ecstasy of this embrace,” it sets the last five words, “*nell’estasio di quest’amplesso*”; and a moment later it is alluded to in the accompaniment to his words “Joy *engulfs* me. . . I stagger, *breathless* [*ansante mi giaccio*—rhymed of course with *bacio*].” In the act 2 duet with Jago, when Otello swears by the “dark, murderous sea,” those words are set to a descending 8ve from  $\hat{5}$  to  $\hat{5}$  (though within a major harmony and as part of a larger descent of a 13th from  $\hat{8}$  to  $\hat{3}$ ). In the “Willow Song” of act 4, motive *Ib* sets, among other lines, the words “the bitter *wave* of tears,” and it appears in skeletal form at the words “*Cantiamo! cantiamo!*” In that



instance, it descends from  $\hat{1}$  to  $\hat{1}$  with a neighboring  $\hat{2}$  in the harmonic context of a prolonged VI—not all that distant in effect from the other instances when we consider that the VI here stands for the subdominant (a *minor* chord whose 5th is  $\hat{1}$ ). This can be shown schematically as follows:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \hat{5} \frown \hat{5} & & \hat{1} \frown \hat{1} \\ \mathbb{I}_b^5 & \text{cf.} & \flat\text{VI (IV function)} \end{array}$$

Motive *Ib* is also used in the “Ave Maria,” when Desdemona asks the Virgin to pray for the “powerful, [who are] also wretched”—that is, Otello, who she realizes is also a victim. Near the end, Otello returns the sentiment with the words “poor creature born under a malign star,” also set to motive *Ib*.

In sum, the verbal images accreted around this musical motive develop from literal drowning to the figurative sense of being engulfed by fate. In this light, it is noteworthy that this string of images begins with Jago talking of the *bed* of the sea (*alvo del mar*, literally the belly of the sea) as a grave (for the Turks) and ends with Desdemona being *suffocated in bed*. Admittedly, the normal word for bed, *letto*, is not usually used for the seabed, but it is sometimes used for a riverbed—so the association is perhaps not entirely farfetched. (It should also be noted that most of the foregoing imagery is not in Shakespeare.)<sup>9</sup>

**MOTIVE II** is introduced in Jago’s recitative following the final subsidence of the storm. As a low E dies away in the double basses, Jago asks Roderigo (who worships Desdemona from afar) what he is thinking; Roderigo answers, “Of drowning myself . . .” to which Jago replies, “He who drowns himself for a woman’s love is a fool.” Apropos *drowning*, note that motive II in part resembles the typical elaboration of motive *Ib*—without the 8ve descent—that is, it involves a neighbor motion around  $\hat{5}$ . In tonality and

9. See Hepokoski (1989a), pp. 163ff., for a discussion of the changes from the original play to the opera libretto.

especially by the double neighbor motion around B, the recitative is also a harbinger of the “bacio” theme.

**The love duet.** The dramatic meaning of motive II, while associated with motive *Ib*, is something like *desire* or *yearning* (and later, its inversion is associated with *resignation*). Example 4, which like example 2 presents the gradual unfolding of a structure, shows how this motive recurs, slightly elaborated, in the opening melody, “Già nella notte,” of the act 1 love duet and forms the deep middleground of the upper voice of its first sixteen bars as well. The analysis differs most markedly from Parker and Brown’s in bars 10–11. Their “prolongation of a minor V” results from following the conventional tonal implications of the chords (G $\flat$  minor, D $\flat$  minor, A $\flat$  dominant 7th) too literally.<sup>10</sup> The motion of the upper voice through an 8ve (motive *Ib*) while the bass prolongs B $\flat\flat$  with a neighbor motion is, in this context, more properly interpreted as a prolongation of a minor I<sup>6</sup>. (Out of context, their reading would be the most natural one.) Compare Verdi’s revision of the second strophe of the “Willow Song”: The skeletal version of motive *Ib* originally was not present in the melody at the word “*Cantiamo!*” and the VI

10. Cf. Parker and Brown, ex.4 (p.56). Of all previous studies, that of Parker and Brown’s has been the most ambitious. They are especially good at critiquing others’ contributions; their remarks seem balanced and just. In particular, their assertion that an analyst needs to pay attention to several aspects of the work (word-music interaction, motivic relationships, and large-scale tonal motion)—rather than focusing too intently on only one—has inspired the present attempt. I fully realize that my charge of others’ being too reductive may seem to some like the pot calling the kettle black. Parker and Brown’s analyses unfortunately fall short in a different way, however. For example, they make the fine observation that the double-bass timbre that marks the beginning of Jago’s machinations in act I recurs in act IV, only to miss that the melody of the latter paraphrases the former (see their article, p.59). Their Schenkerian examples also leave something to be desired. For instance, the implication of their examples 1 and 2 (pp. 52 and 54) is that the diminished 7th chord on C $\sharp$ (D $\flat$ ) has structural significance. As shown in my example 2, below, the prevalence of that particular diminished 7th chord is based on the governing tonal motion from D minor (of which it is the leading-tone diminished 7th) to D $\flat$ (C $\sharp$ ) major (of which it is the common-tone diminished 7th).

chord was prolonged in root position.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the corresponding bars of the first strophe ought to be understood as a prolongation of VI by a V<sup>7</sup>, in turn lending retrospective support to the reading of bars 10–11 of “Già nella notte” as a I<sup>6</sup> prolonged by a V<sup>7</sup>/V (as good an example as one could wish of the limitations of roman numerals). The similarity can best be heard by transposing one or the other of the passages so that their upper voices traverse the same 8ve. The curly braces in example 4 (which apply to the upper voice despite their position) show a parallelism between the first two phrases, of four and five measures, respectively, that incorporates another motive, number IV (ex.7b, below, also shows this parallelism).

Example 5 shows some of the ways in which the beginning of act 1 is echoed in the love duet. As the setting (in the jeweler’s sense of the word) of the “bacio,” the duet is appropriately a nexus of many references back and forward. The central system of the example is an abbreviated middleground graph of the scene; the small staves above and below show the cross-references. Note the parallel between the storm scene’s background motion in 10ths, D/F–C#/E#, and the motion in Desdemona’s statement D $\flat$ /F $\flat$ –C/E shown in example 5. This connection is underscored by the fact that the “collection” [C D $\flat$  E F] that constitutes the outer voices of the first two chords of the storm scene is composed out in the upper voice several times during the love duet (see asterisks in ex.5). (Parker and Brown’s notion, shown in their ex.4, of parallels between Otello’s and Desdemona’s first statements is also attractive—if slightly forced.) One can only assert that the ultimate tonal goal of the act, D $\flat$  major, is anticipated by the first tonal goal of the storm scene—it is hardly something that can be proved. Not that the E major and closely related keys that govern most of the act are mere excursions: It is precisely because E is so fundamental to the act (and the opera as a whole) that the triumph of the “Esultate” is tainted and the shift to D $\flat$  major after the “bacio” at the end of the act is ecstatic rather than flaccid.

After the love duet, motive II recurs most prominently in act 4: first, at Otello’s entrance (as mentioned above in note 10, the link is in part made by the use of the double basses alone, playing on the open E string); and second, in the melody played by the

11. See Hepokoski (1989a), ex.7 (pp.66–67).

english horn and bassoons before the recapitulation of the “bacio,” in A minor (stressing F and E) and then in E minor (accompanying Boito’s translation of the Shakespearian “I kissed thee ere I killed thee”).

**MOTIVE III** is a descending chromatic scale, introduced by Jago in the *brindisi* on the imperative “drink,” initially filling in the diminished 4th from C to G $\sharp$ , then filling in a minor 9th from F to E. Chromatic scales come to characterize him throughout, as is well known; the equally obvious recurrences of chromatic scales in connection with Otello’s staggering in breathless joy in the act 1 love duet, his fainting spell in act 3, and his death in act 4 are also of dramatic significance, suggesting a link between Jago’s evil influence and a weakness in Otello that allows him to be influenced. (When Otello faints at the end of act 3, dramatically recalling to the audience his shortness of breath in the act I duet, the bass articulates the chromatic descent G $\sharp$ ( $\hat{5}$ )–E–G $\flat$ , musically recalling an instance of motive Ia in bars 6–7 of the “bacio.” However, more astonishing than any of the foregoing is the recurrence in act 4 of the descending chromatic scale with the same pitches as when it was first introduced in act 1, C–G $\sharp$  (spelled C–A $\flat$ ), at the end of the “Ave Maria,” on the words “our death”—another diminished 4th reinterpreted as a major 3rd. Note also that Jago’s line in his final act 2 duet with Otello composes out an *ascending* chromatic line from G $\sharp$  to C $\sharp$  (see ex.6); the stormy accompaniment enhances a connection to a similar earlier line, an inner-voice motion in the storm scene of act 1 starting just after Jago’s curse and culminating on the C $\sharp$  of the “Esultate” (see the staff above ex.6). Otello’s triumph is thus alluded to at the moment of Jago’s first triumph.

Motives II and III, like Ib, are associated with images of drowning and death, and play upon cultural connections of these with too great a love of wine and women (one “*drowns* one’s sorrows” on the one hand, and on the other, one is “*besotted* with love”).

**MOTIVE IV** is introduced at the moment of Desdemona’s first entrance onstage and is associated with her throughout. The first four notes of a well-known cantus firmus, it is most often heard in the opera on pitches that could be expressed in fixed-do solmization as *la si re do* (though not always spelled A–B–D–C). It occasionally occurs in association with the fifth and sixth notes of the cantus firmus, *fa mi*, which suggests a connection to

motive I. (The collection mentioned above, in the discussion of ex.5, [C D<sup>b</sup> E F], is also often expressed as motive IV or its inversion.) Example 7a shows how the motive emerges from the middleground as Desdemona emerges from the wings—twelve bars before the point where it has been noted by previous analysts. In the first five bars—before she actually makes her entrance—motive IV is not quite there yet, but it is not quite not there, either: It is present in a form that can only be acknowledged in retrospect, once it has been explicitly confirmed by the succeeding bars; it might be thought to depict Desdemona stirring offstage before her entrance. An elaboration of motive II forms the bass of this passage, as if to say (referring to Jago’s introduction of that motive): “*This* is the woman for whom so many will ‘drown.’ ” Compare the “nesting” of motive IV within motive II here with that shown in example 4. As with the other motives, some of the more important recurrences of number IV are listed in the table. There are also two examples illustrating some surprising transformations that this motive undergoes. Example 7b shows how the motive figures in the love duet, especially how its appearance in the first phrase, to the words “all noise is silenced,” prefigures the “bacio” with the *same pitches* though in a different key (and spelled *la si re do* only in the later instance).<sup>12</sup> Example 8 shows the even more surprising transformation of motive IV into the opening motto of the “Credo”! That the reprise of the opening bars of “Già nella notte” in the last bars of act 1 (also reprising the instrumentation of four solo cellos from the transition to the love duet) was an addition made late in the compositional process could be taken to support the links shown in example 8—as if Verdi felt the need to emphasize them. The *allargando* (only marked in the orchestral score) brings out what most musicians probably would do instinctively: The slight alteration of the chords in the reprise gives three beats of subdominant harmony, making one want to slow them down to the equivalent of five beats so as to equalize them with the preceding five beats of

12. The fifth excerpt in example 7b (v.s.p./s. 97/4) was later changed in Italian scores—though not in English or German ones—both in text underlay (to put the accented first syllable of “*estasi*” on a high note) and in melodic contour (see Hepokoski [1989a], ex.12a and 12b [p.77]). If, as Hepokoski thinks (*ibid.*, n.1 to ch.4, pp.191–92), the alterations represent Verdi’s final intent, then this excerpt loses its already tenuous connection to motive IV.

tonic harmony. Note that the rhythm created by the *allargando* approximates ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩, the rhythm of the Credo's motto.<sup>13</sup> Other recurrences of motive IV are heard in act 3: when Desdemona pleads for Cassio yet again (the motive is clearest in the “tenor” of the accompaniment, but the melody is obviously an elaboration of it—see ex.9a); when, after forcing her to leave, Otello laments the loss of the “mirage” that gave him peace of mind (also ex.9a); and finally, in the *largo concertato*, where it not only provides the basis of the opening melody but is referred to over large stretches of bass, as example 9b (part 1) shows. Although spelled G<sup>#</sup>–A–C<sup>#</sup>–B in the first instance (Desdemona's plea), all three instances of the motive could be expressed as *la si re do*—and the first instance is heard as related to the second when Desdemona's imploring melody is echoed as an accompaniment figure representing all that is preying on Otello's mind. (There is also the verbal echo of “*Dio ti giocondi*” by “*Dio! mi potevi [scagliar].*”)

**The concertato.** The graph of the concertato is in two parts corresponding to its first two sections. The third section is a varied repetition of the first; only the recomposed portion is shown—it has a similar structural function to what it replaces, as one would expect: leading the superposed  $\hat{5}$  (E<sup>b</sup>) back down to  $\hat{3}$ , although over a D<sup>♯</sup> in the recomposition, thus composing out a descending 3rd that was featured in the foreground throughout the middle section. The first section is graphed in some detail, followed by a background sketch; the relationship of background to foreground is quite clear except for the last phase, the motion from VI to V, which is therefore shown in two additional intervening stages of elaboration. Like the “bacio,” the concertato brings together many of the motives—IV has already been noted, and I, Ib, II, and III are indicated on the graph. Moreover, the climactic high f<sup>3</sup>, preceded by an upper neighbor, which occurs over a prolongation of a D<sup>b</sup> minor (7th) harmony and arpeggiates downward, recalls the

13. See Hepokoski (1989a), ex.6b (p.68) and ex.10 (pp.71–72). The original final bars of act 1 retraced the background bass motion, F to D<sup>b</sup>, chromatically in an inner voice—the high trill on D<sup>b</sup> was present in the earlier version. There was a small change in the bars at the beginning of the duet corresponding to the revised ending to make the former passage, in Verdi's words, “more correct”—that is, to soften the cross-relation d<sup>b1</sup> (melody, bar 3)–d<sup>♯</sup> (inner part, bar 4). The change also clarifies bar 3 as a continuation of the prolongation of the tonic harmony.

high point (bar 6) of the “bacio” theme. In contrast to the “bacio,” however, much of the motivic activity is in the middleground, so the full impact of motivic recall is reserved for the end of the opera.

There might be a temptation to reduce the upper voice of the background sketch of the first section (ex.9b) to the same structure as Otello’s first statement in the act 1 love duet (refer to ex.4, above)—note, for instance, the prolongation of  $\hat{5}$  through a descending scale (i.e., motive *Ib*) in both instances. There are, however, several reasons for rejecting this reading: Each background actually resembles more closely the foreground of its own initial phrase—compare the weakness of  $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$  in the first phrase of “A terra” (the upper voice merely couples the bass) with the similar motion in “Già nella notte.” Also, in the concertato, the  $B\flat$  in the bass destabilizes the  $\hat{5}$ ,  $E\flat$ ; moreover, the upper voice continues to rise beyond  $\hat{5}$ , the highest note being the  $f^3$  already mentioned (downbeat of the last bar of the first section)—which, while it is not actually structural in the background, does tend to confirm  $\hat{3}$  as the head tone. Finally, the fact that Verdi cut from the tonicization of F major to the end of the first section in the Paris version suggests that it was dispensable, which it would be in my reading but not in a reading with  $\hat{5}$  as head tone, and therefore more closely resembling example 4.

The graph of the middle section also shows motive IV in the bass—the organization of the surface diminution helps set the notes of the motive in relief. As the table of diminutions in example 9b (part 2) shows, there are two characteristics common to all of the diminutions: dotted rhythms and descending 3rds. The diminution labeled *X* is heard in the first section; *A* and *B* are new to the middle section; *B* seems to derive from a combination of *A*’s rhythm and *X*’s contour. The climactic diminution of the middle section (in the last two bars) is a reference to “Questa è una ragna”—Otello has been caught in Jago’s web.

The analysis here is of the first version of the concertato, the one still in most widespread use. The second version, made for the Paris premiere in 1894, might alter the analysis. (Julian Budden’s and Hepokoski’s descriptions of the changes are naturally not sufficient basis to determine this, and I have not seen the music.<sup>14</sup>) While Hepokoski,

14. Budden, “Time Stands Still in *Otello*,” *Opera*, 32 (1981), 888–93; Hepokoski (1989a), 82–86.

following Budden, makes a case for occasional performance of the revised version—as Verdi’s attempt to solve the problem in the original of Jago’s plotting not coming across—the fact that Riccordi never issued an Italian score with the revised version implies that Verdi preferred the longer original. As others have suggested,<sup>15</sup> it is at least possible that an additional motivation for shortening the concertato was to compensate somewhat for the introduction of the ballet for Paris—this added about six minutes of music (“five minutes, 59 seconds,” as Verdi joked, clearly concerned about the length of the act), and the revised concertato subtracted about a minute and a half. Certainly, Verdi would prefer the Paris version being used over the ad hoc cuts that sometimes disfigure this magnificent (if perhaps dinosaurlike in scale) throwback of a set piece.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the importance of motive IV, however, over the longest range the bass of the middle section refers to motive II (recall that this is when Jago is actively plotting!); in contrast to the position of motive IV at Desdemona’s first entrance (recall ex.7a, above), it is now “nested” between the first and second notes of motive II.

Several details of the voice leading in the middle section can be mentioned as evidence of Verdi’s sure grasp of deeper levels of structure: the middleground composing out in the section’s first twelve bars of the melody of its second bar, C–C♭–B♭–E♭—see the square bracket over A in the table of diminutions in example 9b (part 2); and the summary in three bars of the rising line, C–D♭–D–E♭, that has governed the upper voice of the first thirty-six bars of the section—see the graph for vocal score pages 295–96. In addition, the quite unusual foreground progression of vocal score pages 291–92 is shown in the example (see the small staff above the graph of those bars) to be a composed-out resolution of an embellishing  $\frac{6}{4}$  over C; the surface chords are the result of the combination of the chromatic filling in of the space from C down to G in the bass and the unfolding of the upper voices of the with passing  $\frac{6}{4}$  notes and incomplete neighbors (“échappées”).

The concertato has verbal links with earlier and later lines in the opera: Note the verbal echo of “*un’idra . . . livida*” in “*nel livido fango*”; then, at the very end of the

15. E.g., Spike Hughes in *Famous Verdi Operas* (London, 1968), 463–64.

16. See Joseph Kerman and Thomas S. Grey, *Verdi’s Groundswells: Surveying an Operatic Convention*, in Abbate and Parker (especially pp.174–79).



opera—where there are echoes of many motives besides the ones focused on here—“*un'idra . . . livida*” is recalled by Otello’s description of the dead Desdemona as “*pallida.*”)

Not all musical connections in the opera are motivic, of course, for Verdi is able to exercise great freedom in reminding us of an idea without explicit motivic reference. The pizzicato descending 4th,  $\hat{8}$  to  $\hat{5}$ , in the bass at the beginning of “A terra” (with the same long-short-short-long rhythm) harks back to Jago’s warning against the “green-eyed monster,” which has recurred in several guises as a bass figure in act 2—in “Ora e per sempre addio” and Otello’s duet with Jago—and furthermore, has returned undisguised in the orchestral prelude to act 3. Verdi’s freedom of reference also applies to a number of instances of motive IV, which seems at times to occur as but a “turn of phrase” in passages that may seem otherwise unrelated (or at any rate not very closely related) to its dramatic significance. Because it is a cambiatalike figure, this is unsurprising, but in fact Verdi is quite careful to reserve it for dramatic junctures where it does have some significance—to cite one instance, at Otello’s words “this prayer of yours” in the love duet (the penultimate excerpt in ex.7b, above).

One last important reference to motive IV is in Desdemona’s dying words (see ex.12b, below).

**THE “BACIO.”** Before bringing all these motives together in the final “bacio,” Verdi does two fascinating things: First, he brings them back individually, most of them in Desdemona’s great act 4 *scena*. Some of these recurrences have been noted already: Ib in the “Willow Song” and “Ave Maria”; III at the end of the “Ave Maria.” Motive II is heard most explicitly in the second half of the act, at Otello’s entrance and in the english horn–bassoon melody preceding the two “bacios,” but its presence may be felt in the first half: in ostinato  $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$  neighbor motions and in the pentatonic flavor of the “Willow Song.” Example 10 shows that the last section of the “Ave Maria” melody is based on an inversion of motive II that seems to express resignation (just as the motive in its original form seems to express yearning). Motive IV is the basis of the opening melody of the “Willow Song,” as example 11 shows.

In large part, motives I and Ia are reserved for the second half of the act, starting with Otello's entrance. Indeed, the cross-relation F–F $\flat$  articulates the act into halves.

The second and more astonishing thing Verdi does to enhance the recapitulation of the “bacio” is to recompose it as the ritornello of the “Willow Song” so that we hear it again subliminally *before* we hear it! This is shown in example 12a, which compares the two passages. Thus, the connection once noted by Vincent Godefroy between the “Credo” and the ritornello<sup>17</sup> falls into place as part of a cyclic development from the “bacio” to the “Credo” (as shown in ex.8, above) to the ritornello and finally back to the “bacio.” The ultimate return of the “bacio” theme is heralded again by the paraphrase of its contour in the music accompanying Desdemona's death shown in example 12b.

One has to assume that David Lawton hears the  $\hat{4}\hat{t}$  the beginning of the E major “bacio” in act 4 just as he heard it in act 1, as part of a dominant prolongation, because he draws no distinction between them<sup>18</sup>; I hear it as a “consonant” tonic  $\hat{f}\hat{n}$  the later instance. Frank Samarotto has pointed out in an unpublished paper that the “bacio” in act 4 is heard differently because of its different musical context. It seems dramatically appropriate that—as part of the rising action—the first instance should be more unsettled than the third—as part of the denouement—and that the recurrence should reflect the dramatic facts: Desdemona is dead and Otello is dying, so their kiss can lead to nothing. In act 1 the music pushed beyond the expected goal (I, E major) of the cadential (V) to a  $\hat{6}_4$  surprising, ecstatic D $\flat$ ; in act 4, when Otello kisses Desdemona for the last time, the music, too, has already arrived at its ultimate goal.

Example 13 shows the recurrences of all the motives in the final “bacio.” The chromatic descent (motive III) is carried by the bassoons from C to G $\sharp$  with a neighboring F $\times$ , respelling the chromatic motion from C to A $\flat$  with a neighboring G in the same register at the end of the “Ave Maria” (the words “*our* death” now seem prophetic). The counterpoint to the chromatic line, although inverted at the 8ve and rhythmically displaced, is still recognizable. At the end of the “Ave Maria” this  $\hat{8}-\hat{b}\hat{7}-\hat{b}\hat{6}-$

17. Vincent Godefroy, *The Dramatic Genius of Verdi: Studies of Selected Operas*, vol. 2 (London, 1977), 282–83.

18. Lawton, ex.1b (p.212).

♩ line recalls the shocking closing bars of act 2 and so is linked to the several guises in which “È un’idra fosca, livida” recurs in the bass in acts 2 and 3.

Otello’s last line recalls the skeletal form of *Ib* heard in the “Willow Song”; the assertion of G♯ on his last unfinished word is especially poignant after the plunge in the bass from G♯ to G♮. In the love duet this recollection of his triumph over the Turks fitted the theme of “Let war thunder if after [it] . . . comes . . . love,” but now its irony is devastating. In the final bars, the dotted rhythm reinforces a last echo of the “resigned” inverted form of “yearning” motive II to end the opera as it began, with motive I.

## Example 1 *Table of Motives*

### Motive I

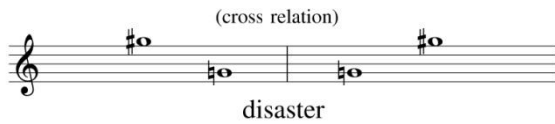


	beginning of act I [see ex.2]
	“ <i>Dio, fulgor della bufera!</i> ” I, H + 6* (13/1)** [see ex.2]
	“ <i>Esultate</i> ” I, L (21/1) [see ex.3]
	Jago’s confession (“ <i>Odio quel Moro</i> ”) I, V + 7–8 (33/3)
	“ <i>Beva,</i> ” in <i>brindisi</i> , I, FF (61/3)—see under Motive III
	love duet, I, SS - 15 (95ff.) passim [see exx. 5 and 7b]
[see ex.8]	{ end of act I, ZZ - 1 (107/2); ZZ + 6 (108/4)
	{ beginning of act II
	“ <i>Sì, per ciel marmoreo giuro</i> ” II, M <sup>(2)</sup> + 1; + 8; etc. (193/2; 4)
	end of act II, P <sup>(2)</sup> + 14 (201/3)
	beginning of act III, bars 6–7 (202/3); A + 8–9 (203/6–204/1)
(recalls the first moment Otello and Desdemona are alone together onstage)	“ <i>Io prego il cielo</i> ” III, I + 15 (219/2)—also cf. “ <i>In gentilia di lacrime</i> ” in love duet, I, UU (100/3)
	beginning of act IV, C + 4–5 (326/3)
	<i>from</i> end of “ <i>Ave Maria</i> ” IV, U - 2, <i>to</i> Otello’s entrance, IV, U (341/3–4)—see under Motive Ia
	Otello’s pantomime based on <i>Othello</i> , V, ii, 7–15 (esp. 13–15?): IV, Y (343/2)—see under Motive II
cf.	{ Desdemona’s death, IV, FF + 17 (354/3)
	{ end of act IV, QQ + 11–12 (364/3)

\* act, rehearsal letter plus(minus) number of bars (e.g., “act 1, 6 bars after letter H”)—I use roman numerals for the acts in this chart because it seems clearer.

\*\* vocal score: page/system

Motive Ia



“Esultate” I, L (21/1) [see ex.3]

end of “Credo” II, H - 6 (120/1) A $\flat$ -A $\natural$

“*Sì, pel ciel marmoreo giuro*” II, M<sup>(2)</sup> + 14–15 (194/3)  
G $\sharp$ (A $\flat$ )-A $\natural$

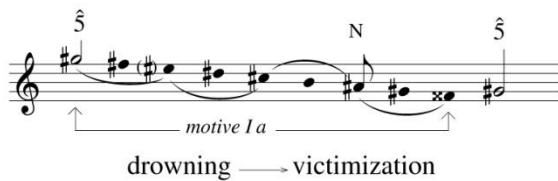
prelude to act III (based on “È un’idra fosca, livida”) bars 6–7  
(202/3) E-E $\sharp$  [see under Motive I]

Otello’s curse, III, R<sup>(2)</sup> + 4–5 (317/3–318/1) A-A $\sharp$

“*Salce*” IV, N + 11–12 (335/4–336/1) D $\sharp$ -D $\natural$

from end of “Ave Maria” IV, U - 2 to Otello’s entrance, IV, U  
(341/3–4) F-E(F $\flat$ )

Motive Ib



[Jago’s curse, I, J + 5 (17/2), but only as a *gesture*]

“Esultate” I, L + 3 (21/1) [see ex.3]

victory chorus, I, Q + 1–4 (27/3–28/4)

“*Un fragil voto di femina non è trop’arduo nodo*” I, V + 3–5 (33/2)

Cassio in *brindisi*, I, EE + 7–10 (60/3)

love duet:

“*Tuoni las guerra*” I, SS - 6 (95/3)

“... *nell’estasi*...” I, WW + 4 (103/3)

“... *ansante mi giacio*” I, YY - 3 (105/3–4) [cf. victory chorus]

in “Era la notte,” Jago “quotes” Cassio: “*L’estasi del ciel tutto m’inonda*” II, J<sup>(2)</sup> - 3 (187/2)—also = motive III

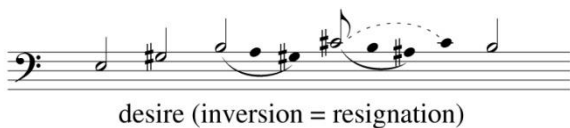
“*Giuro . . . per l’oscuro mar ster[minator]*” II, M<sup>(2)</sup> + 10–12 (194/1–2)

“*Cantiamo!*” in “Willow Song” IV, I (332/1)

“... *misero anch’esso*...” in “Ave Maria,” IV, R + 8 (339/3)

“... *pia creatura*...” IV, NN + 4 (361/2)

## Motive II



“*Stolto è chi s’affoga per amor di donna*” I, T + 5 (31/1–2)

“*Già nella notte*” I, SS - 15ff. (95/1–96/1) [see ex. 4]

Otello’s entrance, IV, U (341/4)

english horn–bassoon melody, IV, Y (343/2) and PP (363/1)

## Motive III



in *brindisi*, I, FF - 4 (61/2) C–Gs; FF (61/3) F–E

in “*Era la notte*” II, J<sup>(2)</sup> - 3 (187/2)—cf. motive *Ib*

accompaniment, Jago’s solo, “*Giuro*” duet, II, N<sup>(2)</sup> + 2ff. (195/2)

Otello’s despair, III, N (226/3)

“*Questa è una ragna*” III, Y (245/1)—cf., in concertato, III, O<sup>(2)</sup> + 9 (300)

Otello faints, III, T<sup>(2)</sup> - 4 (320/3)

prelude to act IV, A + 4–6, bass (325/1) B<sup>#</sup>–G<sup>#</sup> (F<sup>x</sup> neighbor)—cf. “*Ave Maria*”: “. . . *morte nostra*” IV, T - 5 (340/3) C–A<sup>b</sup> (G neighbor) [also see ex.13]

## Motive IV



(entra Desdemona) I, QQ + 1 (92/2)

[see ex.7a]

“*Jago, tu va nella città*” I, QQ + 8 (93/1)

[see ex.7b]

{ *lsrd* enh  
*lsrd*

“. . . *s’estingue ogni clamor*” I, SS - 13 (“*Già nella notte*,” bar 3)

“*bacio*” I, YY (106/1)

“*Credo*” motto(!) II, C + 6ff. [see ex.8]

[see ex.9a]

{ *lsrd* enh  
*lsrd*

Desdemona’s second plea (“*Dio ti giocondi*”) III, C + 3 (206/2)

Otello’s despair (“*Dio! mi potevi scagliar*”) III, N + 1 (226/3)

*lsrd* “*A terra*” III, K<sup>(2)</sup> - 8 (271ff.) melody, middleground [see ex.9b]

“*Willow Song*” IV, E + 8 (328/5) [see ex.11]—also NB bass, IV, E + 1–3 (328/3–4): *lsrd*

(muore.) IV, FF + 15 (354/3)

## Abstract

It is difficult to credit the usual explanation that the mere fact of the “bacio” theme’s recapitulation in act 4 of Verdi’s *Otello* accounts for its powerful effect. Even the irony of dramatic circumstances radically altered from those it accompanied when introduced in act 1 seems insufficient to explain the complex impact of the theme’s return. If, however, its recurrence represents the culmination of musical processes at work throughout the opera, then the effect is understandable. This paper uses a Schenkerian approach to demonstrate that such processes, in the form of motivic transformations and musical-verbal associations, are in fact under way from the very beginning though sometimes hidden below the surface.