

## **PAPER'S NAME:**

*The Choral “ Va, Pensiero “ as a Nationalist Badge  
in the Lyrical World of XIX Century*

## **AUTHOR:**

Pedro Miguel Oliveira Nunes

## **KEYWORDS:**

Nabucco, Verdi, Va Pensiero, Opera Chorus, Nationalism

## **ACADEMIC PAPER/ESSAY:**

In the nineteenth century, opera was the show most appreciated in Italy, not only because it replaced the theater and the popular drama, but also because there was an obsession for choral masses with psychological exaltation. Such is the case of “ *Va, pensiero* “ from the Verdi’s Nabucco - a musical message that exceeds the scenic and dramatic conflict to enter fully into an extra-musical nationalist context, connected to Risorgimento as Mazzini advocated in his Philosophy of Music (1836), considering that the song should be revolutionary, sweeping and encourage people to battle and liberation. The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves “*Va, pensiero*”, more than any other opera chorus, became the unofficial Italian Anthem, extolling the Italians against the Austrian occupation and functioning as a weapon against the excesses of the military forces. This Choral – a very clear and political weapon, a kind of *Dramatis Personae* - was sung in the streets in the face of the occupation forces and no one could do nothing because it was offensive only by allusion. Verdi himself considered this melody and his text like a “ *opera prima* “ – giving to it its personal signature. In the theater, the public was astonished about this message and this new kind of music. This choral is so important in Italy that, during the funeral of the composer, was sung by 300,000 people in the streets and, currently, is a symbol of nationalism and liberty in Italy.

The great biblical choirs as “ *Va, pensiero* “ have become quite appreciated artistic works, especially in the three most important Italian theaters of opera: *San Carlo*

in Naples, *La Scala* in Milan, *La Fenice* in Venice - that even kept the schedule lyric in the most difficult and aggressive moments of the French invasions <sup>1</sup>.

In the first years of his career, Verdi, greatly influenced by the Italian revolts and the nationalist spirit of Mazzini, wrote many epic and strong chorals for operas like *Nabucco* (1842) and *I Lombardi* (1843), which extolled the hosts and cheered the Italian people for freedom and victory. Gradually, it generated a dichotomy between the exaggerated meta-theatricality of *Nabucco* and the mature phase of Verdi, with psychologically dense works such as *Rigoletto* <sup>2</sup>.

Following all the *Risorgimento Italiano* process, this work has become a representative icon of the people's desire to regain self-determination, not only because of the eloquence of music and biblical themes, but mainly because it explores nationalism and militarism, inspired by Solera's libretto. Thus, we can speak of the first patriotic opera composer, although neither the Milanese public and even Verdi himself had conscience of the revolutionary message that it would cause: the Chorus of Hebrews Slaves was a perfect example that exhorted emotionality of the public that demanded repetitions and shouted for the national cause <sup>3</sup>. The Italians identified themselves as oppressed people like the Hebrews, especially in passages as "*oh mia patria si bella e perduta*" and the censors could do nothing because the text was offensive by allusion. "*Va, pensiero*" became a musical symbol against the Austrian occupation – truly a Anthem of freedom.

The librettist Solera was fascinated with the great melodramas of the early nineteenth century, especially the epic, describing political and mystical battles, always with hints of love and hate, passion and repulsion, of alliance and betrayal. Verdi worked with him during his youth (1839 - 1846), in which he composed several operas, such as *Oberto*, *Nabucco*, *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata*, *Giovanna d'Arco* and *Attila*, sharing with the librettist the same Patriotic and Manichean Vision: a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil - Hebrews against Babylonians (*Nabucco*); French against English (*Giovanna d'Arco*); Italians against the Huns (*Attila*) and Christians against Infidels (*I Lombardi*). Similarly, both lived in a huge religious, typical effervescence of their time, strongly inspired in *Risorgimento Italiano*. So, the

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<sup>1</sup> Somerset-Ward, Richard, *Angels and Monsters: Male and female sopranos in the story of Opera, 1600-1900*, 1<sup>a</sup> ed., Hardcover, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 120

<sup>2</sup> "Livrets de mise en scène, Annotated Scores and Annotated Libretti in Two Parisian Collections" in *Studi Verdiani*, 3 volumes, Parma, Istituto di Studi Verdiani, 1985, p. 11-44

<sup>3</sup> Milza, Pierre, *Verdi y su tiempo*, Buenos Aires, El Ateneo, 2006, p. 129

“ *Va, Pensiero* “ was composed in a peculiar patriotic and political context of Italia’s history, a weapon against the occupying forces. Verdi continued to compose this Patriotic Anthems like “ *O Signore dal tetto natio*” from *I Lombardi* and “ *Si ridesti il Leon di Castiglia* ” from *Ernani* with de same desire for revolts.

Italy rivalled with Paris in the production of lyrical opera and the splendour of *Bel Canto*. For the Italians, opera was the top show of exaltation of national pride. If the man affects the era, the era also affects the man and we can found a good example of it in the early production of Verdi and his relationship with the *Italian Rissorgimento*: through his music, he helped to rebuild a politically separate country, by dialects, social habits and governments, making “ *Va, Pensiero* “ one of the great symbols of Unification. In fact, during his childhood, the maestro lived this spirit of *Rissorgimento* and all its consequences in the artistic production; had several friends interested in the expulsion of the Austrians; and, in 1848, was a great defender of the revolt in the streets of Milan.

Even before Verdi, other composers extolled patriotic movements in music: in 1829, Rossini filled his *William Tell* with an anti-Austrian feeling and, in 1844, near Naples, Mazzini followers sang patriotic choruses written by Mercadante for opera *Donna Caritea* (1826) whose text - “*chi per la patria muor, vissuto and assai*” urged to revolt against the occupiers. However, the energy of the Verdian music brought a new color and a new glow to the Italian patriotism. We can also say that the libretto written by Solera helped Verdi to assume the opera composition because he “ *had a strong feeling for him (admiration)*” ”<sup>4</sup>, especially for the text of “ *Va, Pensiero* ” - to which he added his personal signature. The success of “ *Va, Pensiero* “ started in the rehearsals: the originality of the music caused enormous enthusiasm in the singers, the chorus, the musicians and theatre workers<sup>5</sup>. It was normal that during rehearsals, *La Scala* staff would stop what they were doing to come and attend the opera preparations, according to testimony of Pougin “*during the rehearsals, the theatre was revolutionized by a new kind of music. The character of the score was so unusual and unknown, the style so powerful and new, the surprise was general: to hear that choral, singers, choir and orchestra showed extraordinary enthusiasm. More: it was impossible to work in the*

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<sup>4</sup> Phillips-Matz, Mary Jane, *Verdi: a Biography*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 107

<sup>5</sup> Milza, Pierre, *Verdi y su tiempo*, Buenos Aires, El Ateneo, 2006, p. 127

*theatre, because employees, labourers, painters, illuminators and drivers, excited by the music, left their work to listen the choir "* <sup>6</sup>.

*Nabucco* is one of Verdi's operas that remains, always, in repertoire. His core goes beyond the musical, scenic and dramatic issues, to open musical context into the Italian national monument - the *Risorgimento* <sup>7</sup>. In 1836, Mazzini, in his book *Philosophy della Musica*, deeply criticized the *Bel Canto* by calling it hedonistic, individualistic and lacking in moral inspiration. For him, the opera was the stage for lyrical drama, realism, nationalism and social concerns: "*Va, Pensiero* " was the answer to his prayers <sup>8</sup>. Even Donizetti considered "*Belissimo! Belissimo! Belissimo!* " <sup>9</sup>.

In the *première*, the excitement continued until it reached its peak in the choral "*Va, Pensiero*" at the end of the third act; the public has identified itself with the occupied and enslaved Hebrews, clapped, shouted, cried, beat with his feet and demanded to repeat over and over again. Even against the orders of Austrian authorities, the choral was repeated many times and became a Symbol of Freedom and a very clear political message. The premiere was so applauded that, in the autumn of 1842, had fifty-six recitals at *La Scala* <sup>10</sup>. We can understand the success according to the testimonies of *Privilegiata Gazzetta di Milano*: "*the new opera composed by the young maestro Verdi on a lyrical drama of Solera entitled Nabucodonosor was held in our Grand Theatre with a clamorous and overall success. This was one of the few occasions in which the public agreed on universally applaud the ease and fluency of style (...) musical ideas "* <sup>11</sup>. Verdi himself commented later this debut "*artists were singing as badly as they know (...) the choir began to sing – Va, Pensiero - but before start, the theatre looked like a church (...) men abandoned his works one by one and sat beside women and also in the stairs! When the choral finished, they broke the loudest applause I've ever heard, shouting "Bravo, bravo, viva il maestro! "* <sup>12</sup>. Lessona, who wrote an authorized biography of Verdi, confessed, three decades later, that "*The night after the*

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<sup>6</sup> Giudici, Elvio, "Giuseppe Verdi " in *Grandes Compositores*, Salvat, Rio de Janeiro, 1986, vol. 3, p. 101

<sup>7</sup> Parker, Roger, *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 20

<sup>8</sup> Basevi, A., *Studio sulle Opere di Giuseppe Verdi*, Firenze, 1859, p. 17

<sup>9</sup> Kimbell, David, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 109

<sup>10</sup> Milza, Pierre, *Verdi y su tiempo*, Buenos Aires, El Ateneo, 2006, p. 132

<sup>11</sup> Kimbell, David, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 108

<sup>12</sup> Godefroy, Vincent, *The Dramatic Genius of Verdi*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1976, p. 17

premiere no one slept in Milan; the next day, the masterpiece was the topic of conversation among all. Everyone was talking about Verdi “<sup>13</sup>.

After *Nabucco*, Verdi continued the nationalist and majestic spirit of composing in *I Lombardi alla prima Crociata* (1843), another patriotic opera about the struggle of the Lombards against opponents. In this opera, the choral "*O Signore, dal tetto natio*" became, like "*Va, Pensiero* ", a hymn of Italian liberation. An important bolognese newspaper - *Teatri, Arti e Letteratura* - well described the patriotic fervor: "*In Italy, where is singing, there is patriotism. In Bologna, after I Lombardi, they sang up nationalist choirs around the city. Then will come the Paisello of our freedom (they refer to Verdi) and of our Alfieri librettos* " <sup>14</sup>. Also in *Attila* (1846) the public associated the Austrians to the Huns, screamed and raved with passages "*avrai tu l'universo, resti l'Italia to me*" that soon became an anti-Austrian slogan; in *Macbeth* (whose theme, at first glance, could not be associated to the Italians), during the Scottish choral "*O oppressa patria*", the Venetians laid *bouquets* of red and green flowers (the colors of the Italian flag) to the stage.

"*Va, Pensiero* " was, indeed, the first unofficial Italian Anthem and Verdi was the great musical symbol of the *Risorgimento Italiano*. During the Funeral of the composer, 300.000 people sang the "*Va, Pensiero* " under the direction of Arturo Toscanini and everyone knew the music and the text <sup>15</sup>.

Truly, the "*Va, Pensiero* " is probably the best well-known opera choral of the world, a profound success of the lyrical language. Its melody, musical texture, stage presence and also its expressive potential made it a representative symbol of world's opera and an icon of freedom and reunification in Italy. Based on the biblical image of the Babylon's captivity, this choral expresses the suffering of the Jewish people and, by analogy, the suffering of all people who are captives or dominated by foreign empires. It is the result of the fusion between Solera's nationalist urge and the musical genius of Verdi, a beautiful and epic work, mystical and politically symbolic, that reinforces the contrasts between love and hate, suffering and faith, divine precept and heresy. It was, also, the responsible for the extraordinary Verdi's early success: a unknown composer that became a prominent figure of Italian society. Its melody and text, converted to a popular song, became a Political Anthem against the Austrian occupation and a symbol

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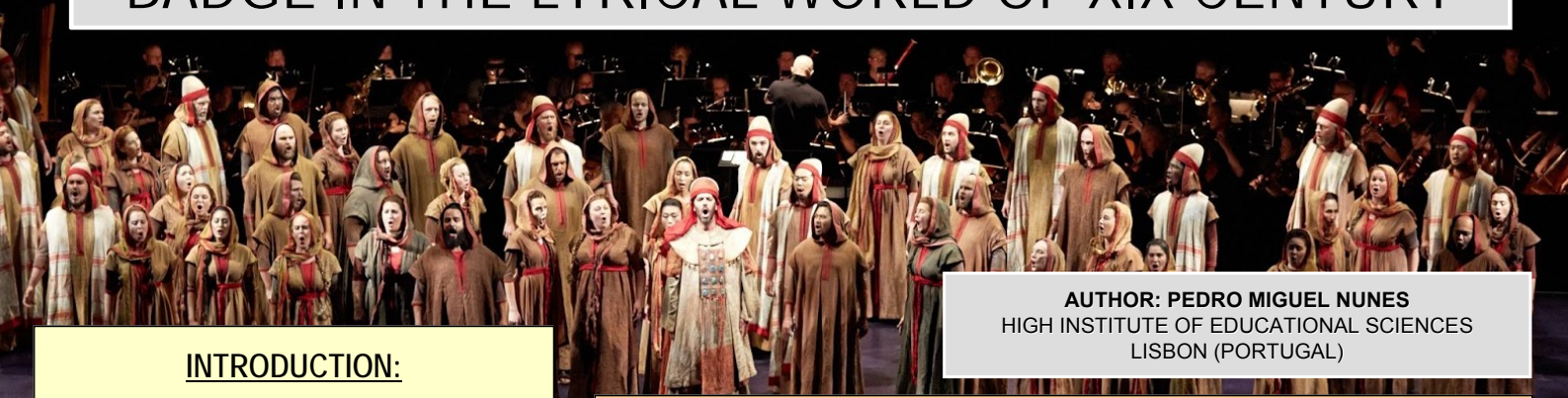
<sup>13</sup> Lessona, Michele, *Volere è Potere*, Firenze, 1876, p. 299

<sup>14</sup> Parker, Roger, *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 35

<sup>15</sup> Godefroy, Vincent, *The Dramatic Genius of Verdi*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1976, p. 17

of strength and hope for Italian people divided between foreign empires and the highly controller Papal State.

# THE CHORAL "VA, PENSIERO" AS A NATIONALIST BADGE IN THE LYRICAL WORLD OF XIX CENTURY



**AUTHOR: PEDRO MIGUEL NUNES**  
HIGH INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES  
LISBON (PORTUGAL)

## INTRODUCTION:

In the nineteenth century, opera was the show most appreciated in Italy, not only because it replaced the theater and the popular drama, but also because there was an obsession for choral masses with psychological exaltation.

Such is the case of "Va, Pensiero" from the Verdi's Nabucco – a musical message that exceeds the scenic and dramatic conflict to enter fully into an extra-musical nationalist context, connected to Rissorgimento as Mazzini advocated in his Philosophy of Music (1836), considering that the song should be revolutionary, sweeping and encourage people to battle and liberation. The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves "Va, Pensiero", more than any other opera chorus, became the unofficial Italian Anthem, extolling the Italians against the austrian occupation and functioning as a weapon against the excesses of the military forces.

This Choral – a very clear and political weapon, a kind of Dramatis Personae - was sung in the streets in the face of the occupation forces and no one could do nothing because it was offensive only by allusion. Verdi himself considered this melody and its text like a "opera prima" – giving to it his personal signature. In the theater, the public was astonished about this message and this new kind of music. This choral is so important in Italy that, during the funeral of the composer, was sung by 300.000 people in the streets and, currently, is a symbol of Italian nationalism and liberty.

## MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY:

Score Analysis of "Va, Pensiero"

Hermeneutics Analysis of the Text  
and possible links to *Rissorgimento Italiano*

Historical Recordings of Nabucco and the Choral

Analysis of the Composer Letters

Bibliography about the Context of *Rissorgimento*

Analysis of Solera's Letters about Nationalism

Historical Approach to the Italian Reunification  
and the role of "Va, Pensiero" as unifier  
of the Italian People – The Liberation Anthem



## RESULTS:

- Following all the *Rissorgimento Italiano* process, this work has become a representative icon of the people's desire to regain self-determination, not only because of the eloquence of music and biblical themes, but mainly because it explores nationalism and militarism, inspired by Solera's libretto. The Italians identified themselves as oppressed people like the Hebrews, especially in passages as "oh mia patria si bella e perduta" and the censors could do nothing because the text was offensive by allusion. "Va, pensiero" became a musical symbol against the Austrian occupation – truly a Anthem of Freedom;

- Testimony of Pougín "during the rehearsals, the theatre was revolutionized by a new kind of music. The character of the score was so unusual and unknown, the style so powerful and new, the surprise was general: to hear that choral, singers, choir and orchestra showed extraordinary enthusiasm. More: it was impossible to work in the theatre, because employees, labourers, painters, illuminators and drivers, excited by the music, left their works to listen the choir" (Giudici, 1986, vol. 3, p. 101)

- In 1836, Mazzini, in his book *Philosophy della Musica*, deeply criticized the *Bel Canto* by calling it hedonistic, individualistic and lacking in moral inspiration. For him, the opera was the stage for lyrical drama, realism, nationalism and social concerns: "Va, Pensiero" was the answer to his prayers. Even Donizetti considered "Bellissimo! Bellissimo! Bellissimo!" (Kimbell, 1981, p. 109). In the *première*, the excitement continued until it reached its peak in the choral "Va, Pensiero" at the end of the third act; the public has identified himself with the occupied and enslaved Hebrews, clapped, shouted, cried, beat with their feet and demanded to repeat over and over again. Even against the orders of Austrian authorities, the choral was repeated many times and became a Symbol of Freedom and a very clear political message;

- "Va, Pensiero" was, indeed, the first unofficial Italian Anthem and Verdi was the great musical symbol of the *Rissorgimento Italiano*. During the Funeral of the composer, 300.000 people sang the "Va, Pensiero" under the direction of Arturo Toscanini and everyone knew the music and the text. This was the song of the people !!!

## CONCLUSION:

Truly, the "Va, Pensiero" is probably the best well-known opera choral of the world, a profound success of the lyrical language. Its melody, musical texture, stage presence and also its expressive potential made it a representative symbol of world's opera and an icon of freedom and reunification in Italy. Based on the biblical image of the Babylon's captivity, this choral expresses the suffering of the Jewish people and, by analogy, the suffering of all people who are captives or dominated by foreign empires. It is the result of the fusion between Solera's nationalist urge and the musical genius of Verdi, a beautiful and epic work, mystical and politically symbolic, that reinforces the contrasts between love and hate, suffering and faith, divine precept and heresy. It was, also, the responsible for the extraordinary Verdi's early success: a unknown composer that became a prominent figure of Italian society. Its melody and text, converted to a popular song, became a Political Anthem against the Austrian occupation and a symbol of strength and hope for Italian people divided between foreign empires and the highly controller Papal State.

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# IX Jornadas de Jóvenes Musicólogos

AFINANDO IDEAS:  
DE NORTE A SUR

Granada · 13, 14 y 15 de Abril de 2016

La **Joven Asociación de Musicología de Granada**, con CIF G19595222, como entidad organizadora de las **IX Jornadas de Jóvenes Musicólogos** celebradas en Granada del 13 al 15 de Abril de 2016, bajo el lema "Afinando ideas: de Norte a Sur", **CERTIFICA** que

D. /D<sup>a</sup>. PEDRO NUNES OLIVEIRA

con DNI 10384286 ha participado en calidad de PONENTE CON EL PÓSTER

"ÓPERA DE VERDI", "NABUCO", EL CORAL "VA, PENSIERO" Y EL MUNDO LÍRICO

COMO ETAPA NACIONALISTA DEL SIGLO XXI".

JOVEN ASOCIACIÓN DE  
MUSICOLOGÍA GRANADA



G19595222

Granada, a 15 de Abril de 2016

Cande Tormo Valpuesta  
Coordinadora  
IX Jornadas de Jóvenes Musicólogos

Belén Moreno Gil  
Coordinadora  
IX Jornadas de Jóvenes Musicólogos

