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'Infin che un brando vindice': from Emani to Oberto

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“Infin che un brando vindice”¹: from *Ernani* to *Oberto*

by Roger Parker, Cornell University

In their work on the young Verdi's “non-definitive revisions,” David Lawton and David Rosen remain doubtful about Silva's cabaletta in Act I of *Ernani*, “Infin che un brando vindice.”¹ As they point out, the piece was introduced into a revival of *Ernani* at La Scala in September 1844 by the famous bass Ignazio Marini, creator of Oberto and, later, of Attila. It was published separately a month later, and began to appear in vocal scores only in the 1850s. Productions which boast a “star” bass may (like the recent Metropolitan version) include the aria, but no autograph has been found, and there was no direct evidence that it was by Verdi. Evidence for and against authenticity was advanced both by Lawton and Rosen, and by Julian Budden.² On the one hand, the publication announcement of October 1844 describes the cabaletta as “introdotta dal Sig. Marini nell'opera Ernani del maestro Giuseppe

Verdi,” with a seemingly deliberate avoidance of the more usual “composta per il Sig. Marini dal maestro Verdi”; and the Ricordi catalogue of 1855 continues the ambiguity by listing the piece as “cabaletta eseguita da Marini,” again with no mention of the composer. On the other hand, music from “Infin” turns up in two other Verdi operas: Nabucco's Act IV cabaletta has an almost identical coda, and Roger's cabaletta in Act I of *Jérusalem*, “Ah! viens démon esprit du mal,” is strikingly similar in melodic contour. While the first instance of “self-borrowing” was ambiguous, likely to support either case, the second seemed unequivocal: as Lawton and Rosen say, “It is hard to believe that Verdi would have snatched a tune from a piece composed by someone else and illicitly inserted into his opera *Ernani*.”

However, thanks in part to the magnificent microfilm holdings of the American

¹David Lawton and David Rosen, “Verdi's Non-Definitive Revisions: The Early Operas,” in *Atti del III° congresso internazionale di studi*

verdiani (Parma, 1974), 198-200 and 230-31.

²Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, I (London, 1973), 167-69.

Institute for Verdi Studies, new evidence has now come to light. The authenticity of the aria is no longer in much doubt; but it belongs not to *Ernani*, but to Verdi's first opera, *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio*.

The matter hinges on a little-known revival of *Oberto*. This opera had a limited sequence of productions in the years following its Fall 1839 Scala premiere, being seen only in Turin (Carnival 1840), Milan (Fall 1840: after the one-day fiasco of *Un giorno di regno*), Genoa (Carnival 1841), Naples (1841), and Barcelona (1841). In all these performances, a system of "singer patronage" seems to have operated. In Turin, Milan, Genoa, and Naples, Antonietta Rainieri-Marini, the creator of Leonora at the premiere, again appeared in that role. Verdi had obviously gone to some trouble to suit the vocal style of Leonora to her rather unusual voice, and it seems as though his efforts were rewarded; Marini was using the work as an *opera di baule*, a piece created for her in which she was assured of some vocal success. It is hard to imagine that she was not the moving force behind each occasion she re-created the role.³

But it is the final revival, in Barcelona, that concerns us here. We can guess that "singer-patronage" was again involved, as this time Ignazio Marini, the husband of Rainieri-Marini, repeated his interpretation of Oberto. The very existence of the revival—almost certainly the first time Verdi was performed outside Italy (and not, to my knowledge, ever mentioned in the Verdi literature)—was drawn to my attention by a review in the *Gazette privilegiata di Milano*, the official daily newspaper of Milan. In a general round-up of recent theatrical events, on 19 February 1842, we learn that:

BARCELONA—Per la beneficiata d' Ignazio Marini diedesi l' opera del maestro Verdi, intitolato *Il Conte di San Bonifacio*. L'esito fu medio, forse per l' indisposizione di qualche artista, e par-

ticolaramente per la mancanza del tenore Lonati da un mese gravemente ammalato. Alcuni pezzi però furono applauditi, massime la cavatina del basso Marini, espressamente scritta dallo stesso maestro Verdi. Il suddetto Marini ebbe in questa circostanza onori d' ogni sorta, regali, corone di fiori, ec. ec. Anche la Gariboldi ed il Gomez riscossero applausi.

(BARCELONA—For the benefit evening of Ignazio Marini, maestro Verdi's opera entitled *Il Conte di San Bonifacio* was given. The performance was only average, perhaps because several artists were indisposed, in particular the tenor Lonati, who has been gravely ill for a month. However, some pieces were applauded, especially the *cavatina* of the bass Marini, expressly written for him by the aforementioned maestro Verdi. The said Marini had in this respect honors of every sort, gifts, crowns of flowers, etc., etc. La Gariboldi and Gomez also aroused some applause.)

The review's suggestion that we may find a further "non-definitive revision" was intriguing. Clearly the next stage was to consult the libretto of this performance, something made possible by the decision of the AIVS to collect on microfilm all available nineteenth-century libretti of Verdi's operas.⁴ The title page, unspecific as to season and theatre, runs as follows:

OBERTO/CONTE DI S. BONIFACIO./
DRAMMA IN DUE ATTI/DA RAPRE-
SENTARSI/nel teatro dell' eccellentis-
sima città/di Barcellona./Barcellona:/
TIPOGRAFIA DI A. BRUSI./-1841

The list of singers in part confirms the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Milano* review:

CUNIZA	Sig. ^a Gariboldi Rosalia.
RICCARDO	Sig. Lonati Catone.
OBERTO	Sig. Marini Ignazio.

³For a more detailed discussion of Rainieri-Marini's influence on Verdi's first two operas, see my "Un giorno di regno: From Romani's Libretto to Verdi's Opera," *Studi verdiani* 2

(1983), pp. 48-52.

⁴The libretto holdings of the Institute are listed in Nos. 9/10 of the *Verdi Newsletter* (November 1981-82).

LEONORA Sig.^a Palazzesi

Matilde.

IMELDA Sig.^a Zambelli

Marietta.

though we find that the tenor Lonati, "da un mese gravemente ammalato," has replaced Gomez.

What then of the cavatina for Oberto "espressamente scritta dal . . . maestro Verdi"? Sure enough, in Act I Scene 3, Oberto's opening recitative ("Oh patria terra") does not lead directly to the duet with Leonora, but is interrupted by a full-length double aria. The complete text, together with two lines of recitative to show the place of insertion, is:

Trovar ti deggio, o figlia ingrata! . . .
¹⁰fremo . . .

Forse al padre segnasti il giorno
estremo!

Ah! se il capo mio canuto
Si servava al disonor,
Perchè mai non son caduto
Là sui campi del valor?

Pria che amar, ferire il petto,
Figlia mea, dovevi a me;
Sia quel giorno maledetto
Che la vita io diedi a te.

Ma fin che un brando vindice
Resta al vegliardo ancora
Saprà l'infamia tergere,
O vinto al suol cadrà.

Verrò quel spettro orribile
Nella fatal dimora;
Cercando il sen del perfido
La man non tremerà.

Scene 4 then begins with Leonora's "Al cader della notte."

The new text neatly encapsulates Oberto's two driving passions: his sense of shame at his daughter's dishonor ("Ah! se il capo mio canuto"); and his desire for revenge ("Ma fin che un brando vindice"). It is a conventional enough insert aria, as so often happens building up one singer's role at the expense of overall dramatic shape: the Barcelona version has *three* double arias back-to-back (Riccardo, Leonora, Oberto) at the beginning of the opera. Of "Ah! se il capo mio canuto" we hear nothing more after its Barcelona de-

but, although it may well have turned up in altered form in some later opera. But "Ma fin che un brando vindice," as we know, had an eventful career. Verdi first used some of it in *Nabucco*, something that should come as no surprise, as the aria was of course unknown in Italy, and *Oberto* seemed unlikely to be revived. Then, two years later, Ignazio Marini sings Silva in *Ernani*. He would like a cabaletta to go with "Infelice, e tuo credevi"; Verdi had written a cabaletta especially for him some years before, one in which he had made a great effect; and, most fortunately, its sentiments of revenge fitted perfectly into the new dramatic context. The opening line is altered slightly ("Ma fin" becomes "Infin"), and two over-specific lines are replaced ("Verrò quel spettro orribile/Nella fatal dimora" becomes "Me fa tremante il subito/sdegno che mi divora"), though not without a certain loss, because the rising chromatic line here is presumably an illustration of the "spettro orribile." Suddenly, the piece "belongs" to *Ernani*. Its appearance in vocal scores seals the transaction.

Of course, there remain unanswered questions: Did Marini have Verdi's approval for the insertion of "Infin" into *Ernani*? Did Verdi perhaps even make the necessary alterations (in text, linking bars, and the addition of the chorus) that changed "Ma fin" to "Infin"? Without firm answers, we cannot entirely oust the cabaletta from *Ernani*, even though most commentators agree that it damages the dramatic pacing of the opera and should not be included in live performance. Nor, in spite of the new evidence, should future producers of *Oberto* (if there are any) regard the cabaletta as a useful addition to the score. Verdi's first opera already staggers under the weight of its dramatic conventionality, and without the music to "Ah! se il capo mio canuto,"⁵ there is in any case no musical opening for the piece. As with so many of Verdi's "non-definitive revisions," "Infin/Ma fin che un brando vindice" is more honored on the shelf than in the performance.

⁵Inquiries at Barcelona and elsewhere are at present under way.