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Keywords
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Verdi's Shakespearean Operas

David Lawton (*Macbeth*)
Linda B. Fairtile (*Otello*)
Emanuele Senici (*Falstaff*)
Roberta Montemorra Marvin (Introduction)

"I prefer Shakespeare to all other dramatists . . ." asserted Verdi to his librettist Antonio Somma in 1853.[1] This was a very high compliment, given Verdi's keen interest in and knowledge of literature, and understandable, given Verdi's long-time acquaintance with the Bard's works. As further testimony of Verdi's esteem, consider the composer's mention of Shakespeare following the premiere of the revised version of *Macbeth* in Paris in 1865, when he wrote to his French publisher Léon Escudier in defense of published critiques of the opera, in which commentators had accused the composer of not having known, understood, or felt Shakespeare when he had composed the work: "He is a favorite poet of mine, whom I have had in my hands from earliest youth, and whom I read and reread constantly."[2]

Verdi's attraction to Shakespeare's works is well documented in other ways as well. The composer owned the complete works of Shakespeare in at least two Italian translations—Carlo Rusconi's prose version, *Teatro completo di Shakespeare* (Padua: Minerva, 1838), and Giulio Carcano's *Teatro scelto di Shakespeare* (Milan: Pirola, 1843–53)—and one French translation—by François-Victor Hugo, *Oeuvres complètes de W. Shakespeare* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1865–72); he also owned several works in Andrea Maffei's translation.[3] Verdi's second wife Giuseppina Strepponi read English, as did his librettist Arrigo Boito, and all three musicians were fluent in French as well. There were thus ample means through which Verdi could have become acquainted with various Shakespearean works.

Verdi's respect for the works of Shakespeare is further attested by the dedication he included for his first Shakespearean opera, *Macbeth*. Upon publication of the piano-vocal score for the opera, Verdi was able to fulfill his desire to honor his beloved patron and father-in-law Antonio Barezzi: "For a long time it has been my intention to dedicate an opera to you

[1] Verdi to Somma, 22 April 1853; *Carteggio Verdi-Somma*, ed. Simonetta Ricciardi (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 2003), p. 41:"[I]o preferisco Shacspeare [*sic*] a tutti I drammatici..."

[2] Verdi to Escudier, 28 April 1865; *Verdi's "Macbeth": A Sourcebook*, ed. David Rosen and Andrew Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 119: "È un poeta di mia predilezione che ho avuto fra le mani dalla mia prima gioventù, e che leggo e rileggo continuamente."

[3] See Francesco DeGrada, "Observations on the Genesis of Verdi's *Macbeth*"; Andrew Porter, "Verdi and the Italian Translations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*"; and William Weaver, "The Shakespeare Verdi Knew"; in *Macbeth Sourcebook*, pp. 156–73, pp. 351–55, and pp. 144–48, respectively. Many of the Italian volumes were themselves translations of adaptations by others rather than of the original English. Several other Italian editions/translations/adaptations of the Bard's works would have been available to Verdi early in his career, among them Giustina Renier Michiel, *Opere drammatiche di Shakespeare volgarizzate da una dama veneta* (Venice: Giacomo Costantini, 1798–00); Michele Leoni, *Tragedie di Shakespeare* (Verona: Societa Tipografica Editrice, 1819–22); Giunio Bazzoni and Giacomo Sormani, *Opere drammatiche di Shakespeare* (Milan: Vincenzo Ferrario, 1830); as well as various plays translated by Andrea Maffei. See also James A. Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: "Otello"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and idem, *Giuseppe Verdi: "Falstaff"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

who have been to me father, patron, and friend. [. . .] Here now is this *Macbeth*, which I love in preference to all of my other operas, and that I thus deem more worthy of being presented to you. May it be testimony to the eternal memory, the gratitude, and the affection it carries to you."[4] Only Shakespeare was good enough for Verdi's tribute to his esteemed benefactor.

Furthermore, Verdi turned to Shakespeare more often than to any other author as a potential source for operatic subjects.[5] Of the dozens of plays, novels, poems, and other literature Verdi considered for operatic setting (but did not write), five were based on Shakespearean works: *Rowena* [*Cymbeline*], *Giulietta e Romeo* [*Romeo and Juliet*], *La tempesta* [*The Tempest*], *Amleto* [*Hamlet*], and *Re Lear* [*King Lear*]. Of these unwritten operas, *Rowena/Cymbeline* exists in a French synopsis, not in Verdi's hand;[6] it was probably sent to Verdi by a would-be collaborator/librettist as a suggested topic. *Romeo and Juliet* is never mentioned directly by the composer, but references to it turn up twice in the Verdian correspondence: once in 1868 in a letter from Camille Du Locle to Verdi concerning the former's suggestions for suitable Shakespearean opera subjects and again in 1890 in a letter written by Giuseppina Verdi to Cesare De Sanctis referring to subjects that Verdi had laid to rest.[7]

The Tempest, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* appear at the beginning of a list of subjects Verdi jotted down in his *copialettere*, titled "argomenti d'opere."[8] For *The Tempest* there is a libretto that was in Verdi's possession written by Andrea Panizza (dated, in a hand other than Verdi's, 1866).[9] *Hamlet* received some attention at various times. In a letter to Giulio Carcano (17 June 1850) Verdi laid out some of the reasons why at that time he did not wish to set *Hamlet*: it was a grand subject that would require too much time and too much work to reduce it to operatic dimensions; instead, he required easier and shorter plots that would more easily permit him to fulfill his obligations in a timely manner. But he did not rule out *Hamlet* completely, in the same letter expressing a desire to, one day, be able to set the subject.[10]

King Lear was the Shakespearean work that Verdi most seriously considered setting

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[4] Verdi to Barezzi, 25 March 1847; *Macbeth Sourcebook*, p. 57: "Da molto tempo era ne' miei pensieri d'intitolate un'opera a Lei che m'è stato e padre, e benefattore, ed amico. [...] Ora eccole questo *Macbeth* che io amo a preferenza delle altre mie opere, e che quindi stimo più degno presentato a Lei. [... L]e sia testimonianza della memoria eterna, della gratitudine, dell'affetto che le porta."

[5] In Verdi's completed operas, only one author is represented more often than Shakespeare: Friedrich Schiller's plays and poems provided material for five of Verdi's compositions: *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845), *I masnadieri* (1847), *Luisa Miller* (1849), and *Don Carlos* (1867, revised 1884), and in part *La forza del destino* (1862). For a list of Verdi's potential opera subjects, see Roberta Montemorra Marvin, *Verdi the Student – Verdi the Teacher* (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdi, 2010), pp. 98–104.

[6] At Sant'Agata, consulted on microfilm at the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani in Parma.

[7] Camille Du Locle to Verdi, 20 October 1868; *Carteggi verdiani*, ed. Alessandro Luzio, 4 vols. (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1935–47), vol. 2, p. 125n. Giuseppina Strepponi to DeSanctis, 2 January 1890; ibid., vol. 1, p. 210: "Don Chisciotte, Giulietta e Romeo e Re Lear dormono il sonno dei giusti!" ("Don Quixote, Romeo and Juliet and King Lear are sleeping the sleep of the just!")

[8] Facsimile in Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio, *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan: [n.p.], 1913; reprint, Bologna: Forni, 1968), Table XI, plate between p. 422 and p. 423.

[9] At Sant'Agata, consulted on microfilm at the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani in Parma.

[10] Verdi to Carcano, 17 June 1850; *Copialettere*, pp. 482–83. Ten years later, Verdi was apparently still intrigued by the subject: in a response to Vincenzo Luccardi's comments (10 June 1860) on the new opera *Amleto* by Luigi Moroni (libretto by Giovanni Peruzzini), Verdi remarked, cynically, that the grand subject of *Hamlet* required such intelligence, profound thinking, and deep artistic sense that it might not be possible for anyone to set it to music. See *Carteggio Verdi-Luccardi*, ed. Laura Genesio (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 2008), pp. 143–44.

as an opera. He returned to the subject repeatedly over the course of some twenty-two years (1843–65) as a possible operatic subject.[11] Beginning in 1850 he worked on a text for it with two of his frequent collaborators: first with Salvadore Cammarano and, after Cammarano's death in 1852, with Somma, from whom he obtained a fully versified libretto.[12] Verdi deemed the play to be "magnificent, sublime, moving" ("magnifico, sublime, patetico") but with less scenic splendor than other subjects,[13] and he deemed it too vast a subject with too much novelty for certain audiences.[14]

Shakespeare is, of course, represented in the composer's output three times: *Macbeth* (1847, revised 1865), *Otello* (1887), and *Falstaff* (1893). Those three operas remain among the most important, and enduring, in Verdi's output. In the following pages, we reprint the entries for these three works that were originally published in *The Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia* (2013).[15] (The *Encyclopedia* does not contain the original language or bibliographic citations for quoted material, and that information is not provided in this reprint. Readers interested in the original language may, in most instances, consult sources listed in the bibliography. The *Encyclopedia* also includes entries for most of the people and many of the theaters mentioned in the texts reprinted here.)

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[11] See, for example, Gabriella Carrara-Verdi, *Per il "Re Lear"* (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 2002); and Gary Schmidgall, "Verdi's *King Lear* Project," *19th-Century Music* 9 (1985): 83–101.

[12] See *Carteggio Verdi-Somma*, op. cit., and *Carteggio Verdi-Cammarano*, ed. Carlo Matteo Mossa (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 2001). See also Philip Gossett, "The Hot and the Cold: Verdi Writes to Antonio Somma about *Re Lear*," in *Variations on the Canon: Essays on Music from Bach to Boulez in Honor of Charles Rosen on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Robert Curry, David Gable, and Robert L. Marshall (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008). pp. 207–24; Alessandro Pascolato, *"Re Lear" e "Ballo in Maschera": Lettere di Giuseppe Verdi ad Antonio Somma* (Città di Castello: S. Lapi, 1902).

[13] Verdi to Léon Escudier, 19 June 1865; Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi*, 4 vols. (Milan: Ricordi, 1959), vol. 3, p. 42.

[14] Verdi to Somma, 19 November 1853; *Carteggio Verdi-Somma*, pp. 99–100.

[15] *The Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia*, ed. Roberta Montemorra Marvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). All three entries are reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

Macbeth[1]

David Lawton

Macbeth (first version, 1847), *melodramma* in four acts, libretto by Francesco Maria Piave and Andrea Maffei, based upon William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. *First performance*: Florence, Teatro della Pergola, 14 March 1847. *Impresario*: Alessandro Lanari. *"Conductor"*: Verdi for the first three performances, Pietro Romani for the remaining six. *Scenic design*: Alessandro Sanquirico. *Costume design*: Odoardo Ciasatti[?]. *Cast for the premiere*: Duncan, King of Scotland (mimed role): N.N.; Macbeth, general in King Duncan's army (baritone): Felice Varesi; Banquo, general in King Duncan's army (bass): Nicola Benedetti; Lady Macbeth, Macbeth's wife (soprano): Marianna Barbieri-Nini; Lady-in-Waiting to Lady Macbeth (soprano): Faustina Piombanti; Macduff, noble Scotsman (tenor): Angelo Brunacci; Malcolm, Duncan's son (tenor): Francesco Rossi; Fleance, Duncan's son (mimed role): N.N.; a Servant to Macbeth (bass): N.N.; a Doctor (bass): Giuseppe Romanelli; Murderer (bass): Giuseppe Bertini; three Apparitions (bass, soprano, soprano): N.N.; Banquo's ghost (mimed role): Nicola Benedetti. *Choruses*: witches, messengers of the King, Scottish nobles and refugees, murderers, English soldiers, Bards, and aerial spirits. *Scene:* Scotland, mainly at Macbeth's castle; opening of Act IV, at the border between Scotland and England. *Period of the action:* the middle of the eleventh century.

Macbeth (revised version, 1865), *melodramma* in four acts, libretto by Piave and Maffei; sections in which new text was required, Piave and Verdi. *First performance*: Paris, Théâtre Lyrique, 21 April 1865, as *Macbeth, opéra en quatre actes, imité de Shakespeare*. French translation by Charles Nuitter and Alexandre Beaumont. *Impresario*: Léon Carvalho. *Conductor*: Adolphe Deloffre for all fourteen performances. *Scenic design*: Edouard Desplèchin and Charles Cambon. *Cast for the premiere*: Duncan, King of Scotland (mimed role): N.N.; Macbeth, general in King Duncan's army (baritone): Jean-Vital Jammes [listed in the libretto as Jules-Vital Ismaël]; Banquo, general in King Duncan's army (bass): Jules-Émile Petit; Lady Macbeth, Macbeth's wife (soprano): Agnès Rey-Balla; Lady-in-Waiting to Lady Macbeth (soprano): [?] Mairot; Macduff, noble Scotsman (tenor): Jules Sébastien Monjauze; Malcolm, Duncan's son (tenor): [?] Huet; Fleance, Duncan's son (mimed role): N.N.; a Servant to Macbeth (bass): N.N.; a Doctor (bass): [Prosper] Guyot; Murderer (bass): [Étienne] Caillot; three Apparitions (bass, soprano, soprano): N.N.; Banquo's ghost (mimed role): Jules-Émile Petit; Hecate (mimed role): N.N.; a Herald (bass): N.N. *Choruses*: witches, messengers of the King, Scottish nobles and refugees, murderers, English soldiers, Bards, and aerial spirits; *ballet dancers*: M. Théodore, Mlles. Ricois, Haisler; coryphées: Mlles Boisserie, Vattone, Bultiau, Bélisson, Lhostellier, Bruch; corps de ballet: Mlles Dauvergne, Verbigier, Guyoneau, Dubose, Van Dieghen, Monroy, Carray, Damand, and Davenne. *Scene and period of the action*: as in the 1847 version.

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Verdi's tenth opera, *Macbeth* was soon widely recognized as one of the composer's most important works. That Verdi himself had a high opinion of the opera is confirmed both by his correspondence and by his dedication of the score to his father-in-law, Antonio Barezzi. Seventeen years later, long after the opera had firmly established itself in the repertory of Italian and foreign theaters, Verdi agreed to revise *Macbeth* for its first Paris production. The revisions were far more extensive than he had at first anticipated. The self-criticism that he brought to the process did not stem from any fundamental dissatisfaction with the earlier work as a whole; rather, it indicated his continuing belief in the opera. The revised version was not a success at its Paris premiere, and there were few productions of it in Italy during the composer's lifetime. Even after the publication of the 1865 version, Italian theaters preferred to produce the original score.

1. Synopsis of the 1847 Version (with descriptions of the 1865 revisions)
2. Genesis of the 1847 Version
    a. Gestation of the Libretto
    b. Composition of the Music
3. Genesis of the 1865 Version
4. The Sources, Reception, and Performance History during Verdi's Lifetime

1. Synopsis of the 1847 Version (with descriptions of the 1865 revisions)
(The titles of the musical numbers are given here as they read in Verdi's autograph full score of the 1847 version, and as found in *The Works of Giuseppe Verdi.*)

No. 1: Preludio. This short orchestral prelude in F minor anticipates several important themes from the opera, including the opening of the witches' chorus in Act III, the music with which the witches summon the apparitions for Macbeth later in the act, and finally a theme from Lady Macbeth's Sonnambulismo (sleepwalking scene) in Act IV.

Act I

Act I takes place in two different settings: a wood (No. 2) and an atrium in Macbeth's castle (Nos. 3–6).

No. 2: Introduzione. Verdi's *introduzione* divides into three large sections: an opening chorus for the three groups of witches, in A minor, ending in A major; a scene in which the witches make predictions to Macbeth and Banquo and they react in a *duettino* in F major; and a closing chorus for the witches in D minor/major. The libretto is based primarily on Act I, scene 3, of Shakespeare's play, except for the last section, for which the lines are derived from Act I, scene 1. Three groups of witches (as opposed to Shakespeare's three witches) appear one after the other amid thunder and lightning. After hearing a drum roll offstage, which announces the approach of Macbeth, the witches perform a round dance. When Macbeth and Banquo enter, the witches greet Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and future King of Scotland. Noticing Macbeth's startled reaction, Banquo asks the witches to predict his future as well. As in the play, they tell him that he will be "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater, not so happy, yet much happier," and that he will beget kings, though he will not be one himself. The witches disappear, and, as Macbeth and Banquo ponder these predictions, King Duncan's messengers enter and tell Macbeth that he has been chosen Thane of Cawdor. Realizing that two of the witches' predictions have now come true,

Macbeth reflects on the third one—the promise of the Scottish throne—in an impressive *duettino* with Banquo, who notices his companion's growing pride. At the end of the *duettino* Macbeth, Banquo, and the messengers leave the stage. The witches return and round off the *introduzione* with an energetic *Allegro* in 6/8 and D minor, changing to D major for the coda.

No. 3: Cavatina Lady Macbeth. The scene changes to an atrium in Macbeth's castle. Lady Macbeth enters to a stormy orchestral introduction based on an ascending sequence built, like the witches' prophecies to Macbeth in No. 2, on transposition by thirds. The traditional four-movement form for her *cavatina* was already prefigured in the text of Shakespeare's Act I, scene 5. In the scena, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth in which he recounts his encounter with the witches and, as in Shakespeare, she wonders whether her husband will have the courage to control his own destiny. The slow movement, a sweeping *Andantino* in D-flat major, is based upon her speech "Hie thee hither" (lines 24–29 of the play). In the *tempo di mezzo*, as in the play, a Servant informs Lady Macbeth that Duncan will be arriving that night. The text of the cabaletta, an energetic *Allegro maestoso* in E major, is based upon Lady Macbeth's famous soliloquy "Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here" (lines 40–53).

No. 4: Recitativo e Marcia. Continuing with text from Act I, scene 5 of the play, in the recitative Macbeth enters and informs Lady Macbeth that Duncan will be arriving that night. She asks him when the king will leave, and, after he tells her "tomorrow," she responds "O! never shall sun that morrow see!" In the opera King Duncan is a non-speaking role, so the libretto omits Shakespeare's Act I, scenes 6–7. Instead, to the sounds of a rustic march in E-flat major played by an offstage *banda*, in pantomime Duncan and his train enter, are welcomed by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and exit to their quarters in the castle.

No. 5: Scena e Duetto. As in No. 3, with very little change Shakespeare's text lent itself to the traditional multi-movement form for a grand *duetto*. The scena, after Macbeth tells a servant to ring a bell when his night draught is ready, is one of Verdi's most impressive accompanied recitatives, based on the celebrated "dagger" soliloquy in Act II, scene 1, lines 31–64, of the play. Hearing the bell, Macbeth leaves to carry out the murder, singing "Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell that summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell." As in Act II, scene 2, of the play, Lady Macbeth then enters and hears the cry of an owl. Macbeth staggers back on-stage, exclaiming "Tutto è finito" (Shakespeare's "I have done the deed"). The *tempo d'attacco*, a 6/8 *Allegro* in F minor, corresponds with Act I, scene 2, lines 14–33, of the play and is concerned with Macbeth's fear and remorse and Lady Macbeth's efforts to dispel them. The movement ends with a *parola scenica*: Lady Macbeth's "follie, follie" (literally "madness" or "folly"). In a letter to Léon Escudier (23 January 1865), Verdi called attention to the importance of these words, commenting that "the whole secret of the effect of this number may well lie in these words and in the Lady's infernal derision." In the slow movement, an *Andantino* in 3/8 and B-flat minor/major, Macbeth dwells on his remorse in lines derived directly from the play (Act II, scene 2, lines 34–35 and 41–42), whereas Lady Macbeth's speeches are a mocking parody of her husband's (with no equivalent in Shakespeare). In the *tempo di mezzo* Lady Macbeth urges her husband to take the daggers back and smear with blood the drugged and sleeping grooms outside Duncan's chamber, so that they will be accused of the crime. Macbeth, paralyzed with fear and remorse, refuses, so she does the deed herself. Left alone, he is terrified by the knocking at the castle gates. Returning to her husband, Lady Macbeth tells him that water will cleanse them of the bloody deed. The resumption of the knocking—the only vestige in the libretto of the "porter" scene

of the play—serves as a turning point that launches the final movement, the cabaletta: a *Presto, alla breve*, in F minor/major. Lady Macbeth urges Macbeth to leave (eventually dragging him away), while he, frozen with guilt, wishes that the knocking could awaken the murdered King.

The *duetto* is the only number in Act I that Verdi revised in 1865. With no modifications to the libretto, he left the music of the scena and the *tempo d'attacco* unchanged, but retouched the music of the slow movement, *tempo di mezzo*, and cabaletta. With respect to the large structure, the most significant revision is in the second half of the cabaletta, in which Lady Macbeth sings an *alla breve* version of the "follie, follie" music she sang in 6/8 in the *tempo d'attacco*, giving these lines even greater emphasis than they had in the original.

No. 6: Finale primo. The scena of this finale is based upon Act II, scene 3, of the play, but with some important differences. Macduff tells Banquo, rather than Macbeth, that he is going to awaken King Duncan. In the opera, Banquo then has an impressive solo based upon lines assigned to Lenox in the play (lines 53–59: "The night has been unruly"; a *Largo* in 4/4 and C minor). The tempo changes suddenly to *Allegro* as Macduff returns to announce that the King has been murdered. After Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, her Lady-in-Waiting, Malcolm, and the chorus enter, Verdi launches the powerful *Adagio concertato*—beginning in B-flat minor but moving to D-flat major—in which all implore Heaven to strike the murderer and give them "light and counsel to tear through the veil of darkness." The text has no precise equivalent in the play, though there is some connection with Banquo's speech (lines 124–29). Although there is no *stretta*, the Finale does end with a closing section in a fast tempo, based upon repeated text from the *Adagio*.

Act II

No. 7: Scena ed Aria Lady. The aria is set in a room in Macbeth's castle; its scena is based upon lines derived from Act III, scenes 1–2, of the play, but in the opera many of the lines that Macbeth speaks in the play, leading to his decision to murder Banquo, are assigned to Lady Macbeth instead. The scena begins with an orchestral introduction comprising two quotations of music from the Act I murder duet: Macbeth's *parola scenica* line "Tutto è finito" played in octaves by trumpets and trombones, followed by a longer passage from the beginning of the *tempo d'attacco*. Macbeth exits at the end of the scena to another famous Shakespearean line "Banquo, thy soul's flight, if it find Heaven, must find it out to-night." Left alone, in the 1847 version Lady Macbeth sings the isolated B-flat-major cabaletta "Trionfai!," a highly unusual formal solution. Although the first quatrain, in which she rejoices that Banquo's death will make their throne secure, has no equivalent in the play, the second quatrain is derived from Act III, scene 2, line 55: "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill."

In 1865, Verdi revised the end of the scena to prepare for the new aria that he composed to replace the cabaletta "Trionfai!". As is clear from the correspondence between Verdi and Piave concerning the new aria "La luce langue," the composer himself wrote the text: not only the prose summary (based upon Act III, lines 49–52, of the play, "Light thickens"), but the actual poetic text. Piave suggested only a few minor changes, which Verdi accepted. The new aria is a slow movement in E minor that ends with a fast section, an *alla breve* in E major that has the effect of a cabaletta, but not its conventional form.

No. 8: Coro di Sicari. The scene changes to a park, with Macbeth's castle visible in the background. Verdi replaces Shakespeare's three murderers with a chorus of tenors and basses. They have gathered at Macbeth's command and wait to ambush and kill Banquo. Their text is derived from Act III, scene 3, lines 1–8,16. The number, an *Andante mosso quasi Allegretto* in C major, has the character of other similar pieces for assassins or conspirators in Verdi's operas, sung mostly staccato and *pianissimo* with sudden loud outbursts.

No. 8a: Scena Banquo. As the numbering suggests, Banquo's aria was a late addition to the score and consists of a scena followed by a slow movement with a fast conclusion. In the scena Banquo, entering with his son Fleance, has a premonition of doom, while in the E-minor slow movement, he is reminded of the night when King Duncan was murdered. The text for these first two movements has no equivalent in Shakespeare. In the play Banquo has a soliloquy at the opening of Act III, scene 1 (lines 1–10, "Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all"), but Piave (or Maffei) did not draw on it for this scene. When the tempo shifts to *Allegro* for the actual murder and Fleance's flight, the text of the libretto rejoins that of the play (Act III, scene 3, lines 16–21).

No. 9: Convito, Visione e Finale Secondo. The scene shifts to a "magnificent hall with a table laid for a banquet" in Macbeth's castle. The Finale is cast as a complex *tempo d'attacco* followed by a *largo concertato*. The text is based upon Act III, scene 4, of the play. Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, her Lady-in-Waiting, Macduff (who is not present in Shakespeare's scene), and knights and ladies are gathered for a banquet. Macbeth invites Lady Macbeth to propose a toast to their guests, and she complies by singing the *brindisi*, "Si colmi il calice di vino eletto" in B-flat major, the text for which is an expansion of a few lines spoken by Macbeth in the play (lines 87–91). During the orchestral coda to the *brindisi*, the Murderer tells Macbeth that Banquo is dead but Fleance has escaped. When Macbeth returns to his seat, as in the play he is terrified by the appearance of Banquo's ghost, which only he sees. Everyone is troubled by Macbeth's outburst, but Lady Macbeth calms him down and tries to reassure their guests. He invites her to repeat the *brindisi* in Banquo's honor, which she does, changing the words of the last stanza appropriately. Before Lady Macbeth completes the *brindisi*, she is interrupted by another outburst from Macbeth, who sees Banquo's ghost again. This time order cannot be restored, and the consternation of all finds expression in the E-minor/major *largo concertato*, based upon Act III, scene 4, lines 121, 131–34 (for Macbeth) and lines 108–09 (for Lady Macbeth), with the lines for Macduff and for the knights and ladies having no exact equivalent in the play. Aside from Lady Macbeth's Scena ed Aria at the beginning of the act, this Finale was the only number in Act II that Verdi revised in 1865: he rewrote the music for the two apparitions of Banquo's ghost in the *tempo d'attacco* and retouched the last two measures of the repeated, climactic phrase of the *largo concertato*.

Act III

No. 10: Coro. The scene takes place in a dark cavern, with a boiling cauldron in the middle. Accompanied by thunder and lightning, the witches brew a magic potion while singing a fast chorus in E minor/major, throwing repulsive ingredients into the cauldron in three groups successively. The texts are based on the play, Act IV, scene 1, lines 6–11 (for the first group), 12–18 (for the second), and 29–32 (for the third). For the closing section, in

a faster tempo, the text is derived from lines 35–36, which the witches sing as they dance around the cauldron.

No. 11: Recitativo, Apparizioni Ballabile ed Aria Macbeth. Macbeth enters the cavern and interrogates the witches about his future, which they predict by showing him three apparitions, all accompanied by lightning and thunder. As in the play, the first is a head covered with a helmet, which warns Macbeth to "beware Macduff." The second, a bloody child, encourages him to be "bloody, bold, and resolute ... for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth." The third, a child wearing a crown and carrying a sapling, predicts that "Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him." Encouraged by these prophecies, which he interprets as good omens, Macbeth now asks the witches whether Banquo's descendants will ever mount the throne. In reply they show him a procession of eight kings, the last of whom is Banquo, carrying a mirror. Macbeth reacts in terror and despair to this sight, and learning from the witches that these apparitions will actually live, he faints. The witches invite aerial spirits to revive him; the spirits dance around him while the witches sing a chorus based on the text of Act IV, scene 1, lines 126–32. After the witches and the spirits have left, Macbeth revives.

In the 1847 version, the act ends with a cabaletta in which Macbeth resolves to burn Macduff's castle and to slay his wife and children. Verdi conceived this entire number as an "act-long aria." The scena comprises Macbeth's interrogation of the witches and the first three apparitions. The slow movement is in two large sections, which Verdi described (in a letter to Felice Varesi) as a "*cantabile spezzato*" ("interrupted *cantabile*") followed by a "*cantabile sui generis*." The interrupted *cantabile* in D major is the show of kings, who appear to the accompaniment of a small complement of wind instruments that play under the stage, while Macbeth's reactions to what he sees are accompanied by the orchestra. The main *cantabile*—"*sui generis*," in F major—is Macbeth's reaction to the appearance of Banquo carrying a mirror. The *tempo di mezzo* includes the G-major *ballabile* (dance) and chorus "Ondine e silfidi," and the aria ends with the cabaletta "Vada in fiamme," for which Verdi tried to create a somewhat novel form.

In 1865, Act III was largely rewritten. In No. 10 Coro Verdi only retouched and slightly abridged the coda. Then, to comply with French tradition, he composed a ballet in three movements to be inserted after the chorus, writing the scenario for it himself on the basis of Hecate's speech in Act IV, scene 1 of the play, lines 39–43. He extensively revised the music for the scena and the two *cantabile* sections. The *tempo di mezzo* was left largely in its original form, except for some added sustained notes for woodwinds and horns in two passages, and a new coda. The most radical change in the act was, however, reserved for the ending. In 1865, Verdi deleted the original cabaletta in A minor/major for Macbeth and replaced it with a duet (with new text and new music) for Lady Macbeth and Macbeth in F minor/major, a solution that has no counterpart in the play, although the last two lines of text make use of Act III, scene 2, line 55, which Verdi had originally used for the second quatrain of the cabaletta "Trionfai!" at the beginning of Act II.

Act IV

No. 12: Coro. The first scene of Act IV is set in "a deserted place on the border between Scotland and England, with Birnam Wood in the distance." A chorus of Scottish refugees, with Macduff standing sorrowfully apart, laments the state into which Scotland has fallen under Macbeth's rule, in a G-minor/major piece reminiscent of the celebrated "Va

pensiero" from *Nabucco*. The text for this chorus is derived from speeches of Ross and Macduff in Act IV, scene 3, of the play. In 1865, Verdi retained the original text, but recomposed the music in a new version in A minor/major that has nothing in common with the original setting.

No. 13: Scena ed Aria con Cori Macduff. This aria is set in the usual multi-movement form. The texts for the scena, a short recitative for Macduff, and the slow movement in D-flat minor/major, "Oh, la paterna mano," are an expansion of Act IV, scene 3, lines 223–26, of the play. In the *tempo di mezzo*, King Duncan's son Malcolm orders the English soldiers to carry tree branches to conceal their movement. The number ends with an exciting cabaletta in A-flat major in an unusual form: the two tenors Macduff and Malcolm sing each phrase as a call in unison, which the chorus repeats as a response. In 1865, Verdi retouched the music of the beginning of the recitative and enriched the orchestral accompaniment in the cabaletta.

No. 14: Sonnambulismo di Lady Macbeth. The setting shifts to a room in Macbeth's castle, as in Act I; it is nighttime. In the scena, a Doctor and Lady Macbeth's Lady-in-Waiting discuss briefly the Queen's deteriorating mental condition. As in the play (Act V, scene 1), Lady Macbeth enters sleepwalking with a lamp, which she puts down before attempting to wash her hands prior to beginning the D-flat-major slow movement, "Una macchia è qui tuttora. . .Via, ti dico, o maledetta!" ("Out, damned spot! out, I say!"). In 1865, Verdi left this scene—one of the high points of the opera and arguably one of the finest solo scenes of his early period—as it was in the original version.

No. 15: Scena, Battaglia, Morte di Macbeth. The setting changes to a hall in the castle, but later shifts to a vast plain surrounded by hills and woods. In the 1847 version, Verdi conceived of this final number as a huge aria for Macbeth with a greatly expanded *tempo di mezzo* that includes the battle, with Macbeth's death scene as a substitute for the normal cabaletta. The scena opens with a turbulent orchestral introduction, after which Macbeth enters, railing against the English forces united against him and taking courage from the prophecy that "no man born of woman" will harm him (as in Shakespeare, Act V, scene 3, lines 1–10). Verdi quotes the text and the music from this prophecy as Macbeth heard it in the apparition scene of Act III. At the end of the scena, Macbeth realizes that life is drying up in his veins. The text of the D-flat-major slow movement, "Pietà, rispetto, onore," is derived from Macbeth's eloquent soliloquy in lines 22–28 of the play: "that which should accompany old age, as honor, love, obedience, troops of friends, I must not look to have." In the *tempo di mezzo* Macbeth learns from Lady Macbeth's Lady-in-Waiting that the Queen has died. He reacts with lines taken from another famous speech (Act V, scene 5, lines 24–28): "life's but a walking shadow ... a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Macbeth's warriors enter with the terrifying news that Birnam Wood is moving. Macbeth rallies his troops "to death, or to victory," after which the scene changes *a vista* to the battlefield. During the D-minor/major battle that follows, Malcolm orders the English soldiers to drop the branches that have concealed them and take up arms. Macbeth is pursued by Macduff, from whom he learns that the latter was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped." The two fight, and Macbeth is fatally wounded. In the F-minor death scene, "Mal per me," which takes the place of a cabaletta, Macbeth rages "at Heaven and the world," cursing the crown for which he shed so much blood. This death scene has no counterpart in the play, in which Macbeth is slain offstage. The opera ends with a very brief *Allegro* in which Malcolm is proclaimed the new King.

In 1865, Verdi left the scena and the slow movement unchanged, but extensively revised everything from the *tempo di mezzo* to the end of the opera. For the first part of the *tempo di mezzo*, up to the scene change and the beginning of the battle, Verdi recomposed the music but left the text unchanged. From the battle to the end, he completely revised both text and music, rewriting the battle scene as a fugue in C major, deleting Macbeth's death scene, and replacing it with a victory hymn in A minor/major.

2. Genesis of the 1847 Version

The contract that ultimately resulted in the premiere of *Macbeth* at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence was the last of three that Verdi signed with Antonio Lanari; it was originally for an opera to be given in Rome in 1846–47 (and later transferred to the Teatro Sociale in Mantua). In the end, Antonio's father, the celebrated impresario Alessandro Lanari, took over the contract, now for a new opera to be premiered at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence in 1847.

From the outset Verdi and Lanari agreed that the new opera should be in the "*genere fantastico*" ("fantastical genre"), a significant choice, for Lanari had been a champion of operas in this genre by foreign composers (he had produced the Italian premieres, in Florence, of Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* in 1840 and Weber's *Der Freischütz* in 1843). As was so often the case, the choice of a suitable subject was intimately bound up with the availability of particular singers. Had Lanari engaged the tenor Gaetano Fraschini, Verdi would have based his opera on Franz Grillparzer's *Die Ahnfrau* (as *L'Avola*). In the end, Lanari was able to secure the services of the baritone Varesi, whom Verdi considered an ideal interpreter for the role of Macbeth. Once the soprano Barbieri-Nini was contracted, the composer decided on *Macbeth* as the subject of his new opera for Florence.

a. Gestation of the Libretto

There were four separate stages in the gestation of the libretto: (a) the composer's *selva*; (b) Piave's versification of the *selva*; (c) Maffei's revision of Piave's libretto; and (d) Verdi's own final revisions of the text into its definitive form.

Verdi described his *selva* for *Macbeth* (to Tito Ricordi) in 1857 (11 April): "Ten years ago I got it into my head to do *Macbeth*; I wrote the scenario myself and, indeed more than the scenario; I wrote out the whole drama in prose, with divisions into acts, scenes, numbers, etc., then I gave it to Piave to put into verse." Although this scenario has not survived, in all likelihood it was very similar to new drafts for the opening of Act II and portions of Act IV that Verdi sent to the librettist in December 1846. Intending to replace specific scenes in the original draft, Verdi wrote out in prose the content of the texts that he wanted, with instructions for specific numbers of lines and particular poetic meters.

Piave's side of the correspondence, including his poetic drafts, has not survived. As we know from Verdi's letters, he became so dissatisfied with Piave's work that he finally called upon Andrea Maffei to revise portions of the libretto. Thanks to the discovery of Verdi's composing libretto—the so-called "Scala" (after Teatro alla Scala where it is housed) libretto—it is possible to document, in part, Maffei's revisions of Piave's work, as well as subsequent changes that Verdi made to Maffei's text. Particularly instructive for the study of the entire process is the evolution of the opening scene of Act II.

b. Composition of the Music

As with other Verdi operas, there were probably three stages in the compositional process. The possibility that Verdi sketched some music while drafting the *selva* is suggested by his statement to Piave (4 September 1846) that he already knew "the general character and the *tinta* of the libretto as if the libretto were already written." With the exception of four numbers that were composed later, Verdi completed the composition and orchestration of the opera before he left Milan on 15 February 1847. He did not compose Nos. 1, 4, 7, and 8a until after his arrival in Florence on 18 February.

3. Genesis of the 1865 Version

Léon Escudier originally asked Verdi only to add a ballet and change the opera's ending for Paris, doing away with Macbeth's death scene on-stage. After reviewing a score that he had requested from Ricordi, the composer wrote Escudier (21 October 1864) that he would have to revise other parts of the opera that were "either weak, or lacking in character": Lady Macbeth's aria at the opening of Act II, several passages in the Act II finale, Macbeth's aria in Act III, the first scenes of Act IV, and the end of the opera.

Ultimately the revisions were even more extensive than the composer had anticipated, as the above synopsis indicates. Only three numbers required new text: Act II, No. 7; Act III, No. 11; and Act IV, No. 15. For this task Verdi turned to his long-time collaborator and co-author of the *Macbeth* libretto, Piave. Verdi completed the revision of Acts I and II by the end of December 1864 and of Acts III and IV by the end of January 1865.

4. The Sources, Reception, and Performance History during Verdi's Lifetime

The principal sources for *Macbeth* are Verdi's autograph full score of the 1847 version, housed in the Ricordi Archives (at the Biblioteca Braidense in Milan), and the autograph portions of the revised 1865 version, inserted in a manuscript copy of the first version (originally the property of Léon Escudier) in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris (Département de la Musique). Two additional manuscript copies are important, because they contain annotations in Verdi's hand. The first is a manuscript full score of the 1847 version (in the Biblioteca of the Conservatorio di Musica Luigi Cherubini in Florence), which Verdi proofread and in which he made corrections in Act I. The second is a manuscript full score (at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC), again of the original version, but containing in Verdi's hand the 1865 revision of several measures of the *largo concertato* of the Act II Finale. These pages should have gone to Paris, but through a misunderstanding Ricordi kept the original and sent a copy to Escudier. Verdi's autograph composing libretto—the "Scala" libretto—is of great interest for the documentation of the genesis of the libretto, but does not represent the definitive text as Verdi set it in his autograph full scores. Finally, a number of drafts for those portions of the libretto that were revised in1865 also exist (at the Villa Verdi at Sant'Agata).

Although reviews of the 1847 premiere were mixed, journalists generally recognized that *Macbeth* represented a significant milestone in Verdi's artistic evolution. Enrico Montazio [Enrico Valtancoli], for example, wrote in the *Rivista di Firenze* that "in its

musical philosophy and in the richness and beauty of its instrumentation," *Macbeth* was "one of the best, indeed perhaps the finest and most accomplished of Verdi's operas." Although critics praised much of the music, they singled out the libretto for particularly harsh criticism. Nevertheless, *Macbeth* had many subsequent productions in Italian and foreign theaters.

Verdi had strong ideas about the musical performance and staging of his opera, as is clear from letters he wrote in 1847 to Varesi and Barbieri-Nini, as well as later ones to Escudier in preparation for the 1865 Paris production. Shortly after the 1847 premiere, Verdi outlined conditions for the performance of *Macbeth* and his subsequent operas, in which he asked Giovanni Ricordi to charge a fine of 1,000 francs for "any alterations or cuts," transposition, or "any modification that would require even the slightest change in the orchestration." Surviving performance materials, librettos, and reviews confirm that Verdi's fears were fully justified. When Verdi himself (or his trusted assistant Emanuele Muzio) was not present, theaters took many liberties with *Macbeth*.

How *Macbeth* (1847) was actually performed during the nineteenth century is abundantly clear from extant manuscript copies of scores and parts, which show three categories of alterations: (1) compositional changes, including cuts and modifications to the orchestration; (2) *puntature* and transpositions, to adapt a role to the voice of a singer for whom the part was not originally written; (3) added indications documenting soloistic liberties of singers or conductors, including vocal ornamentation and tempo modifications. In addition, a study of printed librettos and reviews of productions in Italy between 1847 and 1865 document three types of alteration, confirming some of those apparent in musical sources: (1) substitutions or insertions of text and music not originally part of the score of *Macbeth*; (2) cuts and omissions; and (3) changes in the vocal text, usually due to censorship.

The most frequent substitutions were associated with the part of Macduff. Endeavoring to enhance the role, many tenors substituted a different cabaletta for the one Verdi wrote for Macduff, Malcolm, and the chorus in Act IV (No. 13). The practice was widespread, and one particular piece became the substitution of choice: Zamoro's Act III cabaletta from *Alzira* (No. 10), "Non di codarde lacrime." Although the omission of an entire number from *Macbeth* was rare, some instances are documented during the period before 1865, involving Macduff's aria (No. 13) and, more often, Lady Macbeth's aria (No. 7). Internal cuts affected other numbers, particularly the finales of Acts II, III, and IV. The abbreviation of the Act II Finale was especially common. A number of productions reduced the appearances of Banquo's ghost from two to one, sometimes sacrificing the repeat of the *brindisi* or even its first statement.

The premiere of the 1865 version of *Macbeth* was not a success. After a short run with poor box office receipts, the work was never revived in Paris during the composer's lifetime. Three factors probably contributed to its failure: reservations of the French press; competition with the highly publicized premiere of Meyerbeer's last opera, *L'Africaine*; and liberties that the impresario Carvalho took with the musical performance of Verdi's score. These can be documented from the original performance materials for the Paris premiere (Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris), which show a number of cuts and transpositions, as well as the assignment of the repeat of the *brindisi* to Macduff instead of Lady Macbeth, and the transformation of the cabaletta for Macduff, Malcolm, and the chorus in Act IV to a solo piece for Macduff. Verdi expressly forbade these two changes.

The revised version of *Macbeth* fared no better in Italy during the composer's lifetime. Only two productions have been documented during this period: January 1874 at the

Teatro alla Scala in Milan and a year later at the Teatro Comunale in Modena. Neither production was successful, and as a result, Italian theaters continued to prefer the original version of the opera. Thus, Ricordi went on publishing generic librettos (not related to specific performances) of the 1847 version. Today only the 1865 version is generally familiar to audiences, but it did not establish itself in the repertory until the twentieth century.

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Otello[1]

Linda B. Fairtile

Otello, *dramma lirico* in four acts, libretto by Arrigo Boito, drawn from William Shakespeare's play *Othello, or the Moor of Venice*. *First performance*: Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 5 February 1887. *Impresarios*: Cesare Corti and Enrico Corti. *Conductor*: Franco Faccio. *Scenic design*: Carlo Ferrario. *Costume design*: Alfredo Edel. *Cast for the premiere*: Otello, a Moor, General in the Venetian army (tenor): Francesco Tamagno; Iago, his Ensign (baritone): Victor Maurel; Cassio, his Lieutenant (tenor): Giovanni Paroli; Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman (tenor): Vincenzo Fornari; Lodovico, Ambassador of the Venetian Republic (bass): Francesco Navarrini; Montano, predecessor of Otello in the Government of Cyprus (bass): Napoleone Limonta; A Herald (bass): Angelo Lagomarsino; Desdemona, wife of Otello (soprano): Romilda Pantaleoni; Emilia, wife of Iago (mezzo-soprano): Ginevra Petrovich; Soldiers and sailors of the Republic; Venetian ladies and gentlemen; Cypriot men, women, and children; Greek, Dalmatian, and Albanian soldiers; an innkeeper; four inn servers; people. *Scene*: A seaport in Cyprus. *Period of the action*: End of the fifteenth century.

Verdi's penultimate opera represents his first new work for the stage after a nearly sixteen-year hiatus. As battles raged over the future of Italian opera—should it remain rooted in song or follow foreign trends that assign a greater role to the orchestra—Giulio Ricordi and Boito patiently lured Verdi back into the fray. Boito's libretto, an ingenious and at times eccentric adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, inspired the composer to a highly personal fusion of tradition and innovation. At its premiere *Otello* was widely hailed as a masterpiece, an emphatic and fundamentally Italian answer to the debate over music and drama. Although it remains both admired and respected, *Otello* tends not to be performed frequently, due to the difficulty of casting its vocally demanding title role.

1. Plot synopsis
2. Origins, Genesis, and Performance
3. Performance History
4. Subject and Characterization
5. Libretto and Music

1. Plot synopsis

Act I

Outside the castle. The opera begins with a furious storm at sea. Cypriots and Venetians gather anxiously on shore to await the ship bearing Otello and his army. As the onlookers pray for their safety ("Dio, fulgor della bufera"), Iago, Otello's ensign, quietly wishes for his commander's demise. The ship is saved, and upon landing Otello triumphantly

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proclaims victory over the Turks ("Esultate!") before entering the castle. Iago consoles Roderigo, a Venetian nobleman who is hopelessly in love with Otello's new bride, Desdemona. Sensing an ally, Iago reveals to Roderigo his hatred of Otello, as well as his envy of Otello's lieutenant, Cassio. The Cypriots prepare a celebratory bonfire ("Fuoco di gioia"). Amid the rejoicing, Iago strikes up a drinking song (the *brindisi*, "Inaffia l'ugola"), knowing that Cassio cannot hold his liquor. The lieutenant quickly becomes inebriated, singing the praises of Desdemona and raising Roderigo's suspicion. As Cassio loses his bearings, his song grows increasingly incoherent. Called to take the watch, he stumbles and is mocked by Roderigo. The two men begin to fight. Attempting to stop them, Montano is wounded, and with Iago's encouragement, a riot ensues. At the height of the chaos, Otello appears and calls for calm. He demands an explanation from Iago, who feigns innocence. Seeing the injured Montano, as well as Desdemona awakened from sleep, Otello angrily demotes Cassio. As the stage clears, Desdemona and Otello sing a sublime duet ("Già nella notte densa") recalling their courtship. Three times Otello asks for a kiss as the orchestra intones the "*bacio*" motive. He and Desdemona embrace and walk together toward the castle.

Act II

A room on the ground floor of the castle. Iago and Cassio discuss the latter's recent demotion, and Iago recommends seeking Otello's pardon through Desdemona. After Cassio leaves to speak with her, Iago muses on his warped philosophy ("Credo in un dio crudel"): he is driven by a cruel god who demands evil deeds and promises oblivion in return. As Otello enters, Iago mutters about the unseemliness of Cassio and Desdemona's conversation. Alternately raising doubt and feigning ignorance, Iago plants the seed of suspicion and warns Otello to watch his wife closely. His anger aroused, Otello is subsequently mollified by a chorus of women, children, and sailors singing Desdemona's praises ("Dove guardi splendono raggi," known as the "Homage Chorus"). As they depart, Desdemona approaches her husband to plead on Cassio's behalf. Recalling Iago's warning, Otello questions and then rejects her. In a quartet ("Dammi la dolce lieta parola della perdona"), Desdemona innocently reassures Otello of her love while he agonizes over its imagined loss. At the same time, Iago forces his wife, Emilia, to give him Desdemona's fallen handkerchief. Left alone, Otello stews in Iago's poisonous insinuations, nearly throttling him when he returns ("Tu? Indietro! Fuggi!"). Answering Otello's demand for proof of Desdemona's infidelity, Iago first recounts a lurid dream that he claims to have overheard from the sleeping Cassio ("Era la notte") and then reports having seen Desdemona's handkerchief in his hand. Nearly mad with jealousy, Otello swears revenge ("Sì, pel ciel," a *giuramento*); Iago kneels beside him and pledges to abet his terrible justice. As the two invoke God's vengeance, the curtain falls.

Act III

The great hall of the castle. A herald announces that the Venetian ambassadors' ship has been sighted. As Iago leaves to find Cassio, Desdemona approaches Otello and pleads once again for the disgraced officer ("Dio ti giocondi, o sposo"). Otello feigns a headache and asks for the handkerchief that he had given her. When she cannot produce it, he dares her to defend her chastity. Terrified, Desdemona begs to be told how she has wronged him. With ironic calm, he apologizes for having mistaken her for the courtesan who is married to Otello. He forces her offstage and returns alone. In a choked voice he laments the dissolution of his marriage ("Dio! Mi potevi scagliar"). Iago returns and instructs Otello to conceal

himself while he questions Cassio about his amorous adventures. As Iago and Cassio banter, Otello presumes that they are talking about Desdemona. Cassio produces her handkerchief, which has mysteriously appeared in his house; he and Iago joke as Otello secretly fumes ("Questa è una ragna"). Cassio exits as trumpets announce the landing of the Venetian ambassadors. Otello emerges from his hiding place and, encouraged by Iago, ponders Desdemona's murder; he promotes Iago to captain in gratitude for his advice.

The Ambassadors enter and are greeted with a choral welcome ("Viva! Evviva!"). Lodovico presents Otello with a message from the Doge and questions him about Cassio's absence. Iago craftily encourages Desdemona to express sympathy for Cassio, to which Otello responds with a curse. To the astonished onlookers Otello reveals that the Doge has recalled him to Venice and appointed Cassio to govern Cyprus in his place. Devastated, Desdemona approaches her husband, who angrily pushes her to the ground. As the assembled forces react to this outrage in a *concertato* passage ("A terra!... sì... nel livido fango..."), Iago plots, first with Otello and then with Roderigo, to bring about Cassio's murder. Otello orders everyone to leave the hall and collapses in a faint. As offstage voices sing praises to the Lion of Venice, Iago stands in triumph over the fallen Otello and derisively replies, "Here is your Lion!"

Act IV

Desdemona's bedroom. As Desdemona prepares for bed, she and Emilia discuss Otello's demeanor. Desdemona asks to be buried with her wedding dress. She tells the story of her mother's lovelorn maidservant, Barbara, and recalls the song that she used to sing ("Piangea cantando," known as the "Willow Song"). Seized with foreboding, Desdemona bids a dramatic farewell to Emilia and says a prayer (the *preghiera*, "Ave Maria") before going to bed.

A solo passage for double basses marks Otello's silent appearance. In a grim pantomime, he enters, places his sword on the table, and hesitates before extinguishing the light. As he gazes at Desdemona, the "*bacio*" motive (from the Act I duet) sounds in the orchestra. He kisses her twice, and on the third kiss she awakens. Otello asks if she has prayed and instructs her to recall any sins still on her conscience. Fresh accusations of infidelity follow, which Desdemona repeatedly denies. She implores Otello to let Cassio speak in her defense, only to be told that he is dead. Knowing that all is lost, Desdemona pleads to live for another hour, another moment. It is too late: Otello smothers her. Emilia knocks at the door, crying that Cassio has killed Roderigo. Entering, she sees the dying Desdemona, who absolves Otello. Otello counters that he killed Desdemona after Iago told him that she had betrayed him with Cassio. Incredulous, Emilia calls for help and then denounces Iago. Montano appears and adds the dying Roderigo's corroboration, but Iago manages to escape. Realizing his tragic error, Otello brandishes his sword and recalls his past glory ("Niun mi tema"). Dropping the weapon, he addresses Desdemona ("E tu, come sei pallida") and then stabs himself with a dagger. Dying, he kisses her three times, as the "*bacio*" motive is heard once more.

2. Origins, Genesis, and Performance

The 1870s were an unsettling time for Italian opera. During the previous decade, the cultural elite had become increasingly preoccupied with Wagner's controversial theories about music

and drama. With a performance of *Lohengrin* in Bologna in 1871, the ultramontane specter finally materialized, giving ammunition to those who condemned the stale conventions of Italian opera. Other foreign composers were also increasingly heard in Italy's opera houses, leading the younger generation of native-born musicians further from their inherited values and traditions. Verdi himself was not immune to this influence, having absorbed important lessons from his encounters with French grand opera. Anxiety about Italy's place in the musical world was shaking the foundations of the nation's cultural identity.

After the premiere of Aida in 1871, Verdi seemed to turn his back on dramatic composition. In those years his views on the future of Italian music had grown increasingly negative, soured by accusations that he was, on the one hand, hopelessly old-fashioned and on the other, a traitorous convert to Wagnerism. Perhaps the greatest blow came when the twenty-one-year-old Boito (after collaborating with Verdi on *Inno delle nazioni*) recited (and published) an ode appealing for a savior to cleanse the soiled altar of art. Tired of defending the traditions that had nurtured him—and which he himself had also defied—Verdi turned to non-dramatic genres, composing a string quartet in 1873 and *Messa da Requiem* in 1874. And yet Giulio Ricordi, as shrewd about composers' psyches as he was about their earning potential, believed that Boito, now middle-aged and mellowed, could draw Verdi out of his self-imposed exile.

The *Otello* project was set in motion in June 1879. Ricordi later recalled steering a dinner conversation toward Shakespeare and Boito, with Verdi demonstrating interest and suspicion in equal measure. When Boito visited the next day, bringing plans for a libretto, Verdi's reaction was cool. He encouraged the poet to proceed, but refused to commit himself to the final product. Slowed by illness and self-doubt, Boito eventually dispatched a draft *Otello* libretto to Ricordi, who passed it on to the composer. After reading the libretto, Verdi purchased it from Boito, only to set it aside with no apparent plan for its use.

In fact, the subject remained very much on his mind. When the painter Domenico Morelli sent a sketch from *King Lear*, Verdi asked him next to depict a scene from *Othello*. A few months later he and Boito exchanged letters about the libretto. These early missives reveal competing visions for the conclusion of the third act, which would continue to trouble the composer even after the opera's premiere. While Verdi's suggestions for this scene were highly conventional—a *concertato* followed by a surprise invasion of Cyprus that would enable Otello to recapture his lost glory—Boito's plan depended on maintaining an ever increasing tension that would drive the protagonist to the brink of madness. The compromise suggested by Boito, juxtaposing Otello's fainting spell with the cheers of the offstage chorus, earned Verdi's admiration but left the question of the *concertato* unresolved.

Verdi may have begun planning the music of *Otello* as early as February 1880, but his work on the score was sporadic. By the fall he and Boito were instead absorbed in the revision of *Simon Boccanegra* for a new production at the Teatro alla Scala. This venture enabled them to test their collaboration and allowed Verdi to ease back into theatrical composition after a decade's hiatus. Further work on the troublesome Act III *concertato* followed, with Boito struggling to create a set piece containing both lyrical and dramatic elements. Pleased with the result, Verdi set about revising another of his completed operas, *Don Carlos*, for the Teatro alla Scala.

By early 1884 the composition of *Otello* began in earnest, but Verdi abruptly ceased work after a newspaper erroneously reported that Boito had expressed regret over not setting the libretto to music himself. Feeling betrayed and humiliated, Verdi offered to renounce all

claims on *Otello*. After repeated apologies from Boito, as well as a gift in the form of a new "Credo" text for Iago, Verdi grudgingly agreed to continue with the opera. He resumed composing in December 1884, drafting the Act II quartet and seeking additional revisions to the libretto, including a new text for the Act IV "Willow Song" and a shortening of the final scene. By the following fall he had completed Act IV and immediately began orchestrating it. Over the next several months he orchestrated the remainder of the opera while reworking several passages in Act I. At the end of August 1885 Verdi sent the autograph of Act IV to Giulio Ricordi; Acts I, III, and half of Act II followed in a matter of weeks.

Word of Verdi's first new opera in nearly a decade could hardly be kept quiet for long. Hopeful singers besieged the composer even before he had drafted the final act. It was taken for granted that the Teatro alla Scala would host the premiere, with Boito's great friend, Faccio, as conductor. Among the performers to approach Verdi were the French baritone Maurel, who reminded the composer that he had already been promised the role of Iago, and the leading *tenore di forza*, Tamagno. While Verdi did not regret choosing the resourceful Maurel, he remained skeptical about Tamagno, whose muscular voice and shaky musicianship he feared would ruin Otello's lyrical moments. The role of Desdemona was the most difficult to cast. Verdi reluctantly accepted Pantaleoni, who was romantically involved with Faccio, and worked diligently with her to soften her sometimes steely tone. During this time he altered the refrain of the "Willow Song" and transposed the quartet down a semitone for her benefit. On 1 November 1886 Verdi completed the orchestration of Act II, writing to Boito "All honor to us! (and to *Him*!!)" [most likely referring to Shakespeare]. He was not, however, ready to pronounce the opera finished. While correcting proofs of the piano-vocal score, and then while rehearsing the opera, Verdi continued to make small adjustments to the vocal parts and a significant change to the Otello-Iago duet that closes Act II.

Verdi gave extraordinary attention to the scenery, costumes, and props for *Otello*, both before and after its premiere. He rejected sketches of African and Turkish dress for the protagonist and repeatedly complained about the distracting opulence of Desdemona's gowns. The staging so preoccupied him that he frequently demonstrated his intentions during rehearsals. Eager to document the composer's wishes, Giulio Ricordi prepared a highly detailed *disposizione scenica* intended to prescribe virtually every aspect of future productions. Verdi's anxiety about preparations for the first performance led to a one-week postponement of the opening night. Finally, on 5 February 1887, *Otello* received its long-awaited premiere.

Critics were virtually unanimous in their enthusiasm for the new opera. Many proclaimed the synthesis of music and drama in *Otello* superior to Wagner's efforts. Filippo Filippi swore that he had never seen anything like the fourth act, "even in the legitimate theater, which is closer to reality." Verdi's score received fervent praise: describing the Act I duet for Otello and Desdemona, Camille Bellaigue remarked that "nothing more beautiful has been written in the language of love." A few writers lamented the passing of the "old" Verdi, with his hummable tunes and visceral emotions, but for most, *Otello* represented the beacon that would lead Italy out of the musical wilderness and back to world dominance.

Verdi made two additional, minor changes to the *Otello* score in the weeks following its premiere. After twenty-five performances, the Teatro alla Scala company moved on to Rome, with Adalgisa Gabbi replacing an exhausted Pantaleoni. In the next several months *Otello* made the rounds of Italy's principal theaters. While Tamagno sang in many of these performances, to enormous public acclaim, Verdi preferred the more versatile Franco

Cardinali. Although other tenors, such as Giovanni Battista DeNegri and Jean de Reszke, found success as Otello, Tamagno owned the role for the remainder of his career. He recorded a few excerpts from the opera in 1905, after his health had declined considerably. Maurel, too, committed portions of Iago's music to record near the end of his career.

3. Performance History

The first foreign performance of *Otello*, in a pirated edition, took place in Mexico City in November 1887. The initial legitimate performance outside Italy came five months later, when Cleofonte Campanini led a touring production in the United States. Germany first saw *Otello* in 1888, and a revival of the Teatro alla Scala production, minus Pantaleoni, traveled to London in 1889. More significant for Verdi was the opera's French debut (as *Othello* in a translation by Camille Du Locle and Boito), on 12 October 1894, which occasioned two non-definitive revisions. In accordance with Parisian custom, he and Boito had long planned to insert the obligatory ballet into Act II, later deciding that Act III was a more suitable location. Verdi, who objected to the "monstrosity" of dance added solely for entertainment's sake, found composing the Orientalist music an obnoxious chore. At this time he also revised the problematic Act III *concertato*, initially to an Italian text, to draw attention to Iago's dramatically essential plotting of Desdemona's and Cassio's murders. This new, shorter *concertato* remains a curiosity, and, like the ballet music, does not appear in Italian editions of the score.

Otello's performance history has always hinged on the availability of tenors able to meet the unusual vocals demands of its title role. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Italian performances of this opera were few, perhaps owing to the enormous shadow cast by Tamagno. The Teatro alla Scala did not present *Otello* with any frequency until Arturo Toscanini imported a French tenor, Antonin Trantoul, in 1927. In German-speaking countries tenors apparently felt no such trepidation: Leo Slezak, Helge Roswänge, and Max Lorenz all sang Otello throughout their careers. At the time of his death, Enrico Caruso was planning to attempt the role for the first time at New York's Metropolitan Opera. Instead, *Otello* remained absent from the company's repertory until Giovanni Martinelli assumed the title role in 1937.

In subsequent decades, *Otello* again became closely associated with individual singers. The 1950s and 1960s were dominated by Mario del Monaco, a dramatic tenor who so identified with Otello that he was buried in his costume. When Placido Domingo assumed the role in 1975, his more lyrical interpretation set the standard. Since Domingo's final performance of *Otello* in 2001, casting the opera has become more complicated. Although it is largely unacceptable for a white actor to portray Shakespeare's Othello in blackface, the practice is still prevalent in opera, due to the scarcity of singers of any race who are capable of performing Otello. Recently, however, some Caucasian tenors have sung the role without "blacking up" [including in the Metropolitan Opera's 2015 production], and in 2009 Ronald Samm became the first black Otello to perform in a professional British production.

4. Subject and Characterization

When Ricordi introduced Shakespeare's name into the fateful dinner conversation of June 1879, he knowingly invoked a figure with special resonance. Most Italians of Verdi's

generation accepted Voltaire's characterization of the Bard as a "drunken savage," a writer ignorant of the classical unities and undisciplined in his blending of comedy and tragedy. The first reasonably authentic production of a Shakespeare play in Italy, a Milanese performance of *Othello* in 1842, was drowned out by catcalls. Against this background, Verdi's lifelong admiration for Shakespeare represented a bold stance. But if Italians were reluctant to accept his works at full strength, they had less difficulty warming to musical compositions derived from them. One of the most popular operatic Shakespeare settings was Rossini's *Otello* (1816), to a libretto by Francesco Maria Berio, Marchese di Salsa, which only loosely followed the play. In Giuseppina Strepponi's recollection, both Berio's libretto and Rossini's music came under criticism during the 1879 dinner conversation, but all present agreed that the sublime "Gondolier's Song" would intimidate any future composer considering an opera on this subject.

Although Shakespeare's *Othello* is the sole literary source for Boito's text, the librettist and the composer studied several editions of the play. Verdi probably consulted the Italian translations by Andrea Maffei and Carlo Rusconi that resided, throughout his life, in a bookcase near his bed. Boito, who could read some English, owned and annotated three editions of *Othello* in the original language. His principal sources, however, were François-Victor Hugo's French translation, of which he extensively marked three copies, and the Italian translations by Maffei and Rusconi. The widely published lectures of August Wilhelm Schlegel were included in most Italian editions of Shakespeare's works. Concerning *Othello*, in particular, Schlegel emphasized extremes of character—Othello as savage, Desdemona as saint, Iago as demon—that call to mind George Bernard Shaw's well-worn description of the play as a tragedy written in the form of an Italian opera.

In his introduction to the opera's *disposizione scenica*, Boito identified the turning point of the drama as Iago's articulation of the word "jealousy." Before this moment, Otello is almost godlike, as he appears to calm both the storm at sea and the riot on shore. Boito's decision to eliminate Shakespeare's opening act, moving its account of Otello and Desdemona's courtship into a newly created love duet, enabled Verdi to focus on events in Cyprus while still retaining a vital manifestation of Otello's fleeting happiness. After he is inoculated with Iago's poison, Otello's psychological ruin proceeds at a frightening pace, slowed only by obstacles such as the "Homage Chorus," which Verdi and Boito intentionally placed in its path. The character of Otello's music changes over the course of the opera: the long, lyrical phrases of the love duet are replaced by increasingly broken declamation that exploits the extremes of his vocal range.

Writing to Boito, Verdi described Desdemona as "not a woman but a type," not merely good, but also willing to sacrifice herself for another's happiness. He expressed this selfless purity in musical terms through a graceful lyricism whose symmetry contrasts with both Iago's short and irregular phrasing and Otello's unpredictable outbursts. Verdi's doubts about Pantaleoni's suitability for this role centered on her reputation as a "passionate, ardent, violent" interpreter, seemingly at odds with his ideal Desdemona. Boito, in the *disposizione scenica*, emphasizes the simplicity of her character and bearing, repeatedly cautioning against excesses of movement and facial expression.

Boito's artistic philosophy is most clearly manifest in the character of Iago, whose ironic pose, twisted syntax, and grotesque imagery evoke the *scapigliatura*, an artistic movement that he had helped to launch in the 1860s. While both Shakespeare's and Boito's villains reveal multiple motives for their destructive behavior, only the latter invokes the

supernatural. The operatic Iago's bizarre "Credo" mocks honest men and dismisses heaven—according to the *disposizione scenica*—with a nihilistic shrug. Iago articulates this belief in private; to others, as Boito cautioned, he must appear "jovial and open and almost good natured." Verdi's music captures this dual nature, surrounding Iago by turns with both slippery chromaticism and prominent passages in the "neutral" key of C major. His observation that, except for a few phrases, the role could be sung entirely at half voice reveals a strikingly modern interpretation.

5. Libretto and Music

Boito's approach to adapting *Othello* for the operatic stage was colored by his own artistic predilections. While he tempered his accustomed literary excesses in deference to Verdi's more direct sensibilities, he nonetheless strove to inspire the composer with novelty and flexibility. Rather than a progression of formal set pieces—a convention that Verdi had already stretched to the breaking point—Boito offered unusual arrangements of rhymed and unrhymed verse that more naturally sculpt the high points of Shakespeare's drama.

In the spirit of tradition, Boito employed unrhymed *quinari, settenari,* and *endecasillabi*—a variant of the customary *versi sciolti*—in low-key, conversational passages. But a substantial part of the *Otello* libretto occupies a middle ground between this distinctive brand of *versi sciolti* and the *versi lirici* that characterize full-blown set pieces. Unpredictable arrangements of rhymed *quinari, settenari,* and *endecasillabi*—"rhymed scena" verse—often surround formal poetic stanzas, suggesting a continuous ebb and flow of lyricism.

Boito's use of actual *versi lirici* in *Otello* is likewise atypical, if occasionally self-indulgent. His reliance on longer poetic meters invited the sort of fluid text setting that Verdi had lately absorbed from French opera. At times Boito's pursuit of originality has a clear motivation: he justified employing an unusual form of *senario* verse in the "Homage Chorus" by explaining to Verdi that it could be sung simultaneously with an adjacent stanza in a different poetic meter. But it is difficult to credit anything other than *scapigliato* eccentricity with the obscure classical meters that he sprinkled throughout the libretto.

In a strikingly realistic vein, Boito set the opera's most dramatic moment, Otello's murder of Desdemona, entirely in unrhymed *endecasillabi.* The long lines of text are repeatedly broken and shared between the two characters, producing a suppleness that approaches natural speech. Verdi recognized the musical challenge inherent in this arrangement, admitting that he struggled "to avoid too many recitatives, and to find some rhythm, some phrases for so many unrhymed and broken up verses." At the same time, he acknowledged that Boito's unorthodox approach was the only acceptable solution, demonstrating how far his dramaturgy had evolved over forty years of operatic composition.

Otello represents a highly sophisticated adaptation of a genre, the *dramma lirico,* that Verdi employed throughout his career. Its four continuous acts include both set pieces adhering to varying degrees of convention and freely structured passages organized around orchestral motives. In one sense, Verdi's employment of set pieces in *Otello* can be seen as a victory for tradition, most notably in his stubborn insistence on a *concertato* for Act III despite its inevitable chilling effect on the drama. At the same time, the particular location of these set pieces allows them to function as conscious markers of nostalgia in an otherwise forward-looking score.

The originality of *Otello*'s music is evident from its opening sonority, a startling eleventh chord seemingly without harmonic context. The ensuing pages are violent and tonally disorienting, a musical foreshadowing of the protagonist's coming emotional torment. The unusually large orchestra plays an unprecedented role in *Otello*, nowhere more vividly than in the thematic transformations that propel the wildly thrashing storm. Throughout his career Verdi stretched the boundaries of convention to serve the drama, but he also recognized that familiar structures provide respite when the drama becomes overwhelming. In the midst of the chaos comes "Dio, fulgor della bufera," a symmetrical and tonally unremarkable choral prayer that offers the Cypriots spiritual refuge. *Otello* contains other such moments where convention provides a release: the Act II "Homage Chorus" momentarily slows Otello's rush to irrationality; the sprightly Act III trio, "Questa è una ragna," adds a moment of lightness in the midst of his debasement; and, despite Iago's background plotting, the Act III *concertato* is ultimately heard as a sympathetic response to Desdemona's suffering.

Verdi's reinterpretations of conventional set pieces often blend lyricism and dramatic development to such a degree that their structural outlines pass unnoticed. The Act II quartet unfolds in the context of continuous orchestral activity, from the final phrase of the "Homage Chorus" through a dialogue for Desdemona and Otello that overlaps with the quartet proper. As Desdemona and Otello pour out their emotions in long phrases, Emilia and Iago battle over Desdemona's fallen handkerchief in rapid declamation. After Iago snatches the handkerchief from his wife, a decisive action that enables the opera's tragic conclusion, the character of the quartet is transformed in a lyrical groundswell. This scene, like so many in *Otello*, dissolves into the next one by means of an expanded tonal palette that avoids formal closure.

Many sections of *Otello* defy traditional analysis, even as they appear to contain vestiges of older operatic forms or loosely linked chains of recognizable structures. The love duet that closes Act I is justly celebrated as a new paradigm of lyrical dialogue, virtually devoid of unison singing. Its central section, borrowed from Othello's address to the Venetian senate in Shakespeare's Act I, is an extended, shared memory. Verdi sets each stanza to new and distinctive music, repeating just a single phrase, Boito's version of "She lov'd me for the dangers I had passed, and I lov'd her that she did pity them." The climax of the duet is only secondarily vocal: it is the orchestra's presentation of the "*bacio*" motive that conveys Otello and Desdemona's love, and that will recur with such poignancy at the opera's conclusion.

With the impetus of the operatic culture wars and the inspiration of Boito's libretto, Verdi managed to embrace modernity without betraying his past. *Otello*'s influence on Italian opera is perhaps not direct: the generation of Puccini, Mascagni, and Giordano owes as much to foreign models as to Verdi's final works. But by expanding his compositional vocabulary to include not only formal set pieces—at times considerably reinterpreted—but also free-form dialogues and thematic development, Verdi changed expectations for Italian musical drama. *Otello*'s profound emotional expression and fluid dramatic pacing make it the rare Shakespearean opera that is worthy of its literary source.

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Falstaff[1]

Emanuele Senici

Falstaff, *commedia lirica* in three acts, libretto by Arrigo Boito, drawn from William Shakespeare's comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602), with insertions from his history plays *Henry IV, Part 1* (1598) and *Henry IV, Part 2* (1600). *First performance*: Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 9 Feb. 1893. *Impresario*: Luigi Piontelli. *Scenic and costume design*: Adolfo Hohenstein. *Conductor*: Edoardo Mascheroni. *Cast for the premiere*: Sir John Falstaff (baritone): Victor Maurel; Ford, Alice's husband (baritone): Antonio Pini-Corsi; Fenton (tenor): Edoardo Garbin; Dr Cajus (tenor): Giovanni Paroli; Bardolfo, Falstaff's follower (tenor): Paolo Pelagalli-Rossetti; Pistola, Falstaff's follower (bass): Vittorio Arimondi; Mrs. Alice Ford (soprano): Emma Zilli; Nannetta, Alice's daughter (soprano): Adelina Stehle; Mrs. Quickly (contralto): Giuseppina Pasqua; Mrs. Meg Page (mezzosoprano): Virginia Guerrini; The host of the Garter Inn (silent role): Attilio Pulcini; Robin, Falstaff's page (silent role): N.N.; A young page of Ford's (silent role): N.N.; Chorus of burghers and populace, Ford's servants, masquerade of imps, fairies, witches, etc. *Scene*: Windsor. *Period of the action*: The reign of Henry IV of England (1399–1413).

Falstaff occupies a unique place in Verdi's oeuvre. The composer, who was in his late seventies when he started working on it, conceived it from the very beginning as his final opera. In the late nineteenth century, no less than in the early twenty-first, this meant charging it with the weighty burden of acting as a privileged point of view from which to consider his entire output. Since this output was—and in part still is—regarded as the pinnacle of the centuries-long tradition of Italian opera, *Falstaff* has frequently been heard as the final word on this tradition from its grandest and oldest representative at a time when its meanings were under intense scrutiny. Staging, watching, and discussing *Falstaff*, then, far from being just about *Falstaff* itself, has often meant addressing, at least implicitly, the trajectory of Verdi's career and the importance of his legacy, as well as the historical position and aesthetic relevance of Italian opera. As a consequence, the discourse on *Falstaff* is perhaps the most complex and multi-layered of any opera by Verdi. The weight of this discourse has occasionally threatened to submerge the opera itself, which long was more discussed than loved. In recent decades, however, thanks in part to changes in musical and theatrical culture, *Falstaff* has found a stronger foothold in the international repertory, while continuing to attract sustained critical attention.

1. Genesis
2. Synopsis
3. A Modern Comedy
4. Reception

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1. Genesis

The genesis of *Falstaff* not only was long and complex, but also was characterized by a comparatively unusual degree of self-consciousness, generating a great deal of reflection about what it meant to create an opera, and this opera in particular, by all those who took part in it (a substantial selection of the correspondence produced in connection with this process, recently published in English translation, fills over 500 pages). The tone was set from the very beginning. The first available document directly connected with *Falstaff* is a letter from Verdi to Boito dated 6 July 1889, in which the composer thanks the poet for sending him a *selva* of the libretto, which he deems "excellent," while at the same time expressing concern over the third act (its piecemeal structure as well as a perceived decline in dramatic interest). Boito answered the following day with lengthy reflections on the nature of comedy, and with suggestions on how to compensate for the supposedly unavoidable loss of tension in a comedy's concluding scenes, including those of *Falstaff*. The genre of comedy was new to Boito, and by all intents and purposes to Verdi as well, since the early *Un giorno di regno* was too chronologically and artistically distant to mean anything to him at this stage. This lack of familiarity seems to have required recurrent explorations of comedy's characteristics on the part of both men, rivaling in frequency only Verdi's periodic reminders of his great age and waning physical strengths (but never his mental ones).

It remains unclear who first proposed Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as the main source of the libretto and his *Henry IV* as a supplementary one for some aspects of Falstaff's portrayal. In 1868, the false news had circulated that Verdi was composing a *Falstaff* on a libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni: perhaps that episode had left a mark on the mind of the composer, who was an avid reader of Shakespeare's plays (in Italian and French rather than in the original English). In any case, it seems obvious that he and Boito discussed the subject at some length in Milan in spring 1889, since Verdi, who was away from home when he wrote to the librettist on 6 July, had equipped himself with copies of *The Merry Wives* and both parts of *Henry IV*, as well as *Henry V*, which he wanted to "reread" before moving on to Boito's draft. Their correspondence over the following months is relatively scarce, since they met frequently; it is clear, however, that, after having agreed to a number of structural changes to the *selva*, Boito worked hard on the text, which he completed and handed over to Verdi in early March 1890, having relied substantially on the French translation of Shakespeare's plays by François-Victor Hugo.

Verdi drafted the first act immediately afterwards, astonishingly in less than two weeks. The rest of the composition took much longer, however, and happened mostly in relatively brief bouts of creativity interspersed with months of little or no progress. What is more, and unusually for him, the composer did not follow the libretto from beginning to end, but, after having begun Act II, jumped ahead to Fenton's sonnet at the beginning of Act III, scene 2, then completed Act II and the rest of the final scene. With still nothing to show for Act III, scene 1, in September 1891, he started writing out the full orchestral score, which, as usual, happened in two stages: voices and main instrumental parts first (the so-called skeleton score), rest of the orchestra second. Verdi had always been a fast orchestrator, but in *Falstaff* timbre plays a more prominent role than in any previous work, and therefore instrumentation turned into a protracted compositional act. The first scene of Act III was not composed until summer 1892, probably because it was dramatically problematic, repeating a situation already

seen in Act II, scene 1 (a second assignation from Alice, prelude to a second prank, communicated to Falstaff again by Quickly).

Verdi and Boito had initially worked on the opera in secret. They publicly announced that *Falstaff* was in progress in November 1890 at a dinner with Giulio Ricordi, Verdi's long-time publisher. Within a couple of days several newspapers had published the news that Verdi, the grand old man of Italian opera, was composing a new work, and that this work would be a comedy. Despite *Falstaff*'s long genesis, public interest in the project never waned, not least because Ricordi made sure it would not. Ricordi himself took on an increasingly central role in facilitating the completion of the score, and especially the organization of the initial run of performances. In the final decades of the nineteenth century the publisher had gradually replaced the impresario as the main figure in opera production. It was at least partly because Ricordi, by far the most important music publisher in Italy at the time, was based in Milan that the Teatro alla Scala had come to be regarded as the foremost opera theater in the nation. It was therefore out of the question that *Falstaff* would not be premiered there, even if Verdi was initially unhappy with the impresario Piontelli.

In any case, the composer had the final word over all aspects of the production. Several late-stage alterations to the score were prompted by his meticulous work with the singers, most notably Pasqua (Quickly) in summer 1892 and Garbin (Fenton) later the same year. That the protagonist would be the French baritone Maurel, the first Iago in *Otello*, was apparently considered a matter of course, until the baritone almost ruined everything by asking for too high a fee and demanding to be "the first interpreter in certain first-class theaters," which Verdi considered an outrageous request. In the end, the singer backed down. Hohenstein, the set and costume designer, was dispatched to Windsor to get an idea of the local architectural style, and to museums and libraries in London and Paris to find models for the costumes.

Verdi continued to make small changes to the score during the protracted rehearsal period. Not even the premiere brought this work to conclusion: he altered several important passages in the following months. Two of them, in the Act II ensemble and at the conclusion of Act III, scene 1, were first performed at the Rome premiere (15 April 1893); three others, all in Act III, scene 2, were first heard (in French) when *Falstaff* arrived in Paris in April 1894. Some of the printed scores in current circulation include all these changes, while others do not; this confusing editorial situation will be remedied once a critical text is eventually published.

2. Synopsis

Like *Otello*, *Falstaff* is not divided into the numbers familiar from Verdi's earlier operas: each of its six scenes is basically through-composed. Amidst the quicksilver flow of words and music, however, several more self-contained moments emerge, signaled below in parentheses by their incipit and an indication of their nature: some of these terms (such as "*concertato*," "sonnet," "fugue") were used by the opera's authors in their correspondence; others are found in the critical literature.

Act I

Scene 1: The interior of the Garter Inn. Dr. Cajus bursts in on Falstaff and angrily accuses him of having broken into his house, beaten his servants, and ridden his mare; for their part, Falstaff's followers Bardolfo and Pistola got him drunk and then robbed him. While the two deny their charges, Falstaff first candidly admits to his and then chases the doctor out. He tells Bardolfo and Pistola that, since funds are scarce, he is out to seduce two beautiful local women, Alice Ford and Meg Page, both married to wealthy burghers; to this purpose, he asks his followers to deliver two passionate letters he has written to the two ladies, but they refuse to carry out such a dishonorable task. Furious, Falstaff asks the page Robin to do it instead and then lectures his two followers on the meaninglessness of the concept of honor, before dismissing them (monologue, "L'onore! ladri!").

Scene 2: Garden outside Ford's house. Alice and her daughter Nannetta meet Meg and Quickly. Chatting away, Alice and Meg discover that they have both received identical letters from Falstaff. After some initial confusion, they burst into laughter and decide to play a trick on their old, fat, and double-timing suitor (quartet, "Quell'otre! quel tino!"). Meanwhile, Ford, Dr. Cajus, and Fenton have been informed of Falstaff's intentions by Bardolfo and Pistola: the five of them together discuss how to stop him (quintet, "È un ribaldo, un furbo, un ladro"). The two groups–women and the men—alternate on the stage, plotting secretly: the women decide to send Quickly to woo Falstaff to a meeting with Alice while Ford is away, while the men settle on Ford visiting the knight in disguise. Amid the general activity, Nannetta and Fenton, who are in love but whose liaison is opposed by Ford, manage to steal a few moments alone (*duettini*, "Labbra di foco!" and "Torno all'assalto!").

Act II

Scene 1: The interior of the Garter Inn. Bardolfo and Pistola tell Falstaff that they repent and wish to be readmitted to his service. Quickly arrives asking for a private interview with the knight: she tells him that Alice has received his letter, is very much taken by him, and wishes to inform him that her husband is always out of the house between two and three o'clock. She then adds that Meg, while equally taken, regrets that her own husband is seldom absent. After checking with Quickly that neither of the two ladies knows that the other has also been approached by him, Falstaff rewards her with a pittance and sends her away.

Another visit is announced: this time it is Ford disguised as a certain "Mr. Fontana," preceded by a demijohn of Cyprus wine. Admitted to Falstaff's presence, "Fontana" offers the knight a purse full of gold coins if he agrees to seduce Alice Ford, explaining to a stunned Falstaff that he has been in love with Alice for some time, but she has repeatedly refused him; given Falstaff's irresistible charms, he is more likely to succeed, and, after having fallen once, Alice will be more open to the approaches of "Fontana". Falstaff, who cannot believe his good luck, accepts the offer and informs "Fontana" that he is well on his way to success, since he has a rendezvous with Alice that very day between two and three o'clock. While Falstaff goes to prepare himself, Ford, devastated by what he believes is his wife's infidelity, reflects on marriage and jealousy (monologue, "È sogno? o realtà?"). Falstaff comes back, and asks "Fontana" to walk with him for part of the way to Ford's house.

Scene 2: A room in Ford's house. Quickly informs the other women that her visit to Falstaff has been successful (narrative, "Giunta all'albergo della Giarrettiera"). They all laugh except Nannetta, who has heard that her father is planning to marry her to Dr. Cajus: Alice

promises her daughter that the wedding will not take place (*arietta*, "Gaie comari di Windsor!"). Falstaff enters, finding Alice alone: she pretends to be flattered by his attentions but bemoans his girth; he responds that once he was a slender young man (*arietta*, "Quand'ero paggio"). Quickly returns to announce that Meg is coming, and Falstaff hides behind a screen. Meg, trying not to laugh, advises Alice to flee, because her husband is about to arrive. But a moment later Quickly shouts out that Ford is coming, this time for real. He enters with all the other male characters and additional followers, and furiously searches for Falstaff. The women manage to hide the knight in a laundry basket, while Nannetta and Fenton run behind the screen for a kiss. Ford hears the kiss and, believing that Falstaff and Alice are hiding there, marshals his troops around the screen, while the women pretend to be busy with the laundry, forcing a breathless Falstaff to stay in the basket (*concertato*, "Se t'agguanto! / Se ti piglio!"). Once the screen is knocked down and Nannetta and Fenton, oblivious to what is happening around them, appear, Ford berates them before running upstairs to continue the search. At this point Alice orders her servants to throw the contents of the laundry basket out of the window and into the Thames. Ford, who has returned, is dragged to the window by his wife to witness the scene.

Act III

Scene 1: Outside the Garter Inn. A black-humored Falstaff, still wet from his dip into the Thames, laments his fate, but his spirits are lifted by a glass of warm wine (monologue, "Ehi taverniere!"). Quickly manages to convince him that Alice had nothing to do with the prank and hands him a letter in which she arranges a tryst for midnight at Herne's Oak, where Falstaff is to appear disguised as the Black Hunter. Alice, Meg, Nannetta, Ford, Fenton, and Dr. Cajus eavesdrop while Quickly begins to tell Falstaff the story of the Black Hunter, whose ghost appears at night in the Royal Park; once Quickly and Falstaff go into the inn, Alice mockingly continues the story (narrative, "Quando il rintocco della mezzanotte"). All of them will meet later at Herne's Oak in various disguises. Coming out of the inn, Quickly overhears Ford reassuring Dr. Cajus that, taking advantage of the masquerade, he will bless his union to Nannetta: the doctor will disguise himself as a monk, while Nannetta will be the Queen of the Fairies.

Scene 2: Windsor Park at night. Fenton, who has arrived first, sings a song about lips, kisses, and singing (sonnet, "Dal labbro il canto estasiato vola"). Nannetta arrives and is about to kiss Fenton, but Alice interrupts them, gives Fenton a monk's cape, and rapidly explains how, with the help of Meg and Quickly, they plan to trick Ford into blessing their union, while Dr. Cajus will "marry" Bardolfo disguised as another queen of the fairies. When Falstaff approaches they all hide except Alice, who tells him that Meg is also about to arrive: the knight is wild with excitement at the prospect of a double adventure. But Meg screams in fake terror that the witches' coven is approaching. Falstaff looks for cover while all the others enter wearing masks. Nannetta calls upon the fairies to assemble (song, "Sul fil d'un soffio etesio"). Then everybody starts hitting, pinching, and poking Falstaff, ordering him to confess all his innumerable sins (ensemble, "Pizzica, pizzica"). But Bardolfo's mask falls off, and Falstaff understands he has been tricked yet again: when he greets "Fontana," Alice reveals that he is none other than her husband. While Ford announces the wedding of the Queen of the Fairies, Quickly throws a white veil over Bardolfo. Alice asks her husband to bless another couple as well and Ford agrees, only to discover, once all the masks are removed, that

they are Nannetta and Fenton, while Dr. Cajus has married Bardolfo. Now it is Falstaff's turn to mock Ford, but Alice is quick to point out that there are three men who have been tricked by the women: Falstaff, Ford, and Dr. Cajus. Ford agrees to Nannetta's and Fenton's marriage, and Falstaff calls for a chorus to end the scene before proceeding to dinner: all sing that everything in the world is a joke, but "he who laughs last laughs best" (fugue, "Tutto nel mondo è burla").

3. A Modern Comedy

Falstaff is Verdi's final opera; it was premiered when the composer was almost eighty years old; and it is a comedy. These facts have had an enormous impact on its reception and interpretation: singularly or together, they constitute the key points of almost all approaches to the opera. Accordingly, the discourse on *Falstaff* has centered upon such related issues as late style, old age, summation, retrospection, irony, and parody. Recently, however, other interpretive contexts have emerged, among them nationalism and modernity, which, while not wholly unconnected to those dominating previously, have opened up new critical vistas.

The question of genre is perhaps the most extensively discussed, beginning with the opera's authors, as we have seen. Verdi's choice of a comedy to conclude a career almost exclusively dedicated to serious works can be interpreted in different, but by no means mutually exclusive, ways. First, it might have been an attempt on the composer's part to demonstrate that his mature art encompassed the whole spectrum of genres, rather than being limited to its tragic side (in 1879 he had reacted angrily when Ricordi's house journal, the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, published an old pronouncement of Rossini's about Verdi's presumed lack of inclination toward semi-serious and comic opera). Second, choosing comedy could be viewed as a vote of confidence in the continuing validity of genre differentiation in the face of its increasing erosion on the late-nineteenth-century operatic stage (not least, incidentally, by Verdi himself in *La forza del destino*). Third, the composer may have considered comedy, the genre traditionally associated with irony and detachment from the world's folly, as particularly well suited to the image of himself as a wise old man that he publicly promoted in the concluding decades of his life and career. Finally, and relatedly, comedy, the genre that traditionally allows for a meta-theatrical attitude, was necessary for the self-reflective stance that *Falstaff* exhibits toward the nature and history of opera. In other words, by choosing a comedy Verdi gave himself the chance to expound his views on opera in general, on his previous works in particular, and more specifically on *Falstaff* itself, not only through words (which he did very rarely in public), but also through music and drama, where he was decidedly more at ease.

Falstaff's commentary on opera is closely related to the opera's many references and allusions to previous operatic works—Verdi's own included—and to musical styles, forms, and genres. To focus on one among the many possible threads, the clues pointing to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, a parodic subtext in *Falstaff*, are numerous and significant, starting of course with Sir John and Don Giovanni, the protagonists' names. In the opening scene Falstaff reminds Dr. Cajus that the one sin he has *not* committed is forcing himself on the doctor's housekeeper—note that Dr. Cajus's "sforzata la mia casa" echoes Leporello's "sforzar la figlia." Sir John has not one Leporello, but two servants, Bardolfo and Pistola, who are not entirely willing aides-de-camp to their general in his seduction campaigns. Just like their

predecessor, they seem to take more than a little pleasure in telling Ford that "Falstaff le occhieggia tutte, che sieno belle o brutte, pulzelle o maritate" ("Falstaff ogles them all, whether they are beautiful or ugly, maidens or married"), and that "ha voglie voraci il Cavalier" ("the Knight has voracious desires")—compare Leporello's catalogue aria. Alice and Meg mask themselves to catch the protagonist *in flagrante delicto*, like Anna and Elvira, but, of course, Falstaff, unlike Giovanni, has not had the chance to lay a finger on them. Both men have an insatiable appetite, but the body of old Falstaff shows its grim consequences: in Act III he admits that he is getting too fat. As for their appetite for women, Falstaff's is far from Giovanni's "ben natural": he needs the women's money. When asked to repent by "supernatural" voices, Falstaff gives in immediately, unlike Giovanni; and while Giovanni's refusal causes real fire and sulphur to appear, Falstaff's "Nitro! Catrame! Solfo!" are but interjections to signal his surprise and rage when he recognizes Bardolfo.

The closing fugue, which refers intertextually to the fugato at the end of *Don Giovanni*, "Questo è il fin di chi fa mal," can serve as a good example of the possible meanings of such allusions. In both cases the display of contrapuntal complexity accompanying a moralizing text is introduced as a prelude to dinner, and, more important, by a meta-theatrical remark: in *Falstaff* "Un coro e terminiam la scena" ("A chorus and we'll end the scene"), in *Don Giovanni* "E noi tutti, o buona gente, ripetiam allegramente l'antichissima canzon" ("Let us all, good people, merrily repeat the very old song"). These remarks highlight the stylistic difference, both verbal and musical, from what has come before and announce the fugal sections as commentaries on the preceding action. Mozart's use of learned style can be read as the musical equivalent of the "very old song" of the libretto, and perhaps also of the moralizing content of the text and its possible associations with religion. In light of the proverbial tone of the two texts, the connection set up by Boito with the moral of *Don Giovanni* serves to highlight the difference between the beliefs of the past and those of the present: moderns know better than to count on the ultimate punishment for evil deeds; they have learned that everything is a joke. If Boito's text is the ironic reversal of, or expansion upon, a very old proverb, then Verdi's music can be interpreted as an equally ironic gloss on old music. Here, a musical procedure marked as "old" is used to establish an intertextual connection with an "old" opera. This connection functions not as a way of elevating *Falstaff* to the same high plateau of the "classic" *Don Giovanni*, but rather as a way of measuring the distance between the past and the present, the old and the new, the classic and the modern. The sense of distancing is achieved through distortion of significant traits like the proportions of the fugue subject, its making havoc with the prosody of the text, and the lack of coordination between final words and final music. Thus, "Tutto nel mondo è burla" can be heard as embodying some of the most significant aspects of modernity: the experience of separation from the past and the belief in the necessity of confronting this past.

Similar conclusions about *Falstaff*'s modern stance toward the operatic past could be reached by following other threads, for example, the Wagnerian one, with *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Parsifal* as the clearest intertextual presences (the former especially in Act II, scene 2, the latter in Act III, scene 1). Wagner also emerges in connection with another aspect of the opera, one not linked to allusion or quotation: its rejection of operatic numbers in favor of through-composition. Wagner's works were, of course, the models of through-composed operas in the late nineteenth century, ones that were followed to differing extents and results by different composers. In this context, it should be emphasized how, in Italy,

Falstaff positioned itself at the forefront of this stylistic trend: when compared with both *Otello* and Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (premiered nine days before *Falstaff*, and now generally considered its composer's most Wagnerian score), the structural fluidity of Verdi's final work is striking. The more self-contained moments signaled in the synopsis above, although numerous, are generally much shorter than similar moments in *Otello*, *Manon Lescaut*, and other contemporary titles such as Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890) or Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892). It is as if Verdi wanted to compose an opera that could both sum up the most significant moments of the history of the genre and look far into its future.

The risk of such a stance was that it could leave the present out—a risk common to most self-consciously modern works of art. Verdi was particularly concerned about the present state of Italian opera, however, especially from a nationalistic point of view. He considered the Italian tradition under threat from foreign influences and saw *Falstaff* as pointing to a specifically Italian way of responding to such influences, one that was deeply rooted in the glorious past of Italian musical art. This attitude chimed with an ongoing effort on the part of Italian intellectuals and artists to build a solid identity for the young nation by constructing its cultural genealogy in a strong nationalistic sense. Since Verdi himself was made to represent the very best that Italian art had produced over the course of the nineteenth century, the discourse surrounding the composition and reception of *Falstaff* resonated with nationalistic overtones: this was the final opera by the most Italian of composers, and therefore an eminently Italian work of art. *Falstaff*'s decidedly modern stance, however, made it rather difficult to substantiate such claims, despite the emphasis duly placed on the Italian sources of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives*, or the quotes from Giovanni Boccaccio's fourteenth-century *Decameron* inserted by Boito in the libretto. The very fact that the opera is a comedy makes it harder to consider it as the summation of the increasingly serious tradition of nineteenth-century Italian opera, especially keeping in mind the tragic bent of Verdi's oeuvre. The modern comedy of *Falstaff* challenged many assumptions when it first appeared, something that could not but have a strong impact on its reception.

4. Reception

The premiere of *Falstaff* was an international event, attended by dozens of critics, many from abroad. Its success, carefully orchestrated by Ricordi's publicity machine, was preordained, and indeed the general tone of the initial reviews was adulatory. Nationalistic rhetoric was displayed in abundance in Italian publications: one reviewer, for example, proclaimed that, after hearing *Falstaff*, "we feel happy and proud to be Italians [...] We join the entire Italian people in offering homage to the composer, in shouting evviva to Giuseppe Verdi [...] He is the unforgettable example of a virtuous, severe, and serene life, a life that once again tells the beloved old story: ancient valor is not yet extinguished in Italian hearts." At the same time, several critics had to admit that the audience reacted to at least parts of the opera in a startled, even cool manner (only to reassure their readers that this would disappear after repeated hearings). Clearly, many found *Falstaff* difficult to understand and connected this difficulty with the score's modernity: according to one critic, no Italian opera had ever been "conceived and composed with such an intention of being modern, making no concession whatsoever to the taste of the public, as *Falstaff*." In December 1894, Verdi himself wrote to Ricordi in considerable distress over the sparse attendance at a series of excellent performances of the

opera conducted by Arturo Toscanini in Genoa.

Between April and June 1893, the company that had premiered *Falstaff* at the Teatro alla Scala took the production to Genoa, Rome, Venice, Trieste, Vienna, and Berlin. Within less than two years the opera had been performed in all the major operatic capitals as well as many provincial theaters, including Barcelona, Bucharest, Buenos Aires, Hamburg (under Mahler), Lisbon, London (Covent Garden, 19 May 1894), Madrid, Mexico City, Munich, New York (Metropolitan Opera, 4 February 1895), Paris (Opéra Comique, 18 April 1894), Prague, Rio de Janeiro, St. Petersburg, and Stuttgart, in many cases in the local language. In most of these cities the same pattern was witnessed: an initial surge of interest soon followed by neglect.

Two figures were crucial in keeping interest in *Falstaff* alive in the first half of the twentieth century despite such early coolness: Toscanini and the baritone Mariano Stabile. The conductor made a point of repeatedly scheduling the opera in all the venues with which he had established links, notably the Teatro alla Scala, the Metropolitan Opera, and the Salzburg Festival. His 1950 NBC radio broadcast, later released in various formats, has long been considered a benchmark interpretation. Toscanini coached Stabile in the title role for La Scala's 1921 performances: the baritone would go on to sing it an estimated 1,200 times all over the world for nearly four decades.

In the last half century *Falstaff* has been performed ever more frequently, increasing familiarity clearly bringing increasing understanding and pleasure. Among many productions, perhaps the most memorable have been those by Carl Ebert, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and Richard Jones (all for Glyndebourne), Luchino Visconti (Vienna State Opera), Franco Zeffirelli (Covent Garden and Metropolitan Opera), Götz Friedrich (Deutsche Oper Berlin), Giorgio Strehler (Teatro alla Scala), Peter Stein (Welsh National Opera), and Graham Vick (Covent Garden), several of which have traveled widely and are available on video. *Falstaff* has never been as frequently performed, intensely discussed, and aesthetically appreciated as it is at present.

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