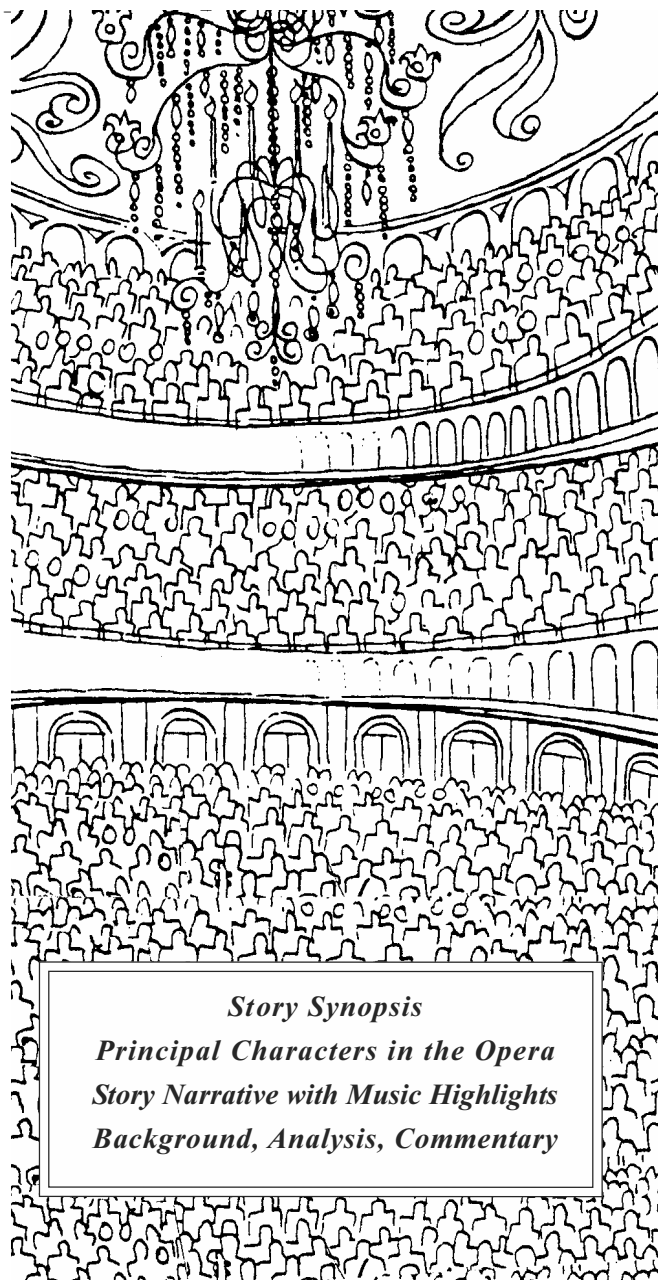


Nabucco

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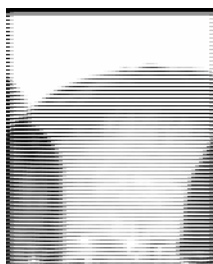
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Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series

Burton D. Fisher is a former opera conductor, author-publisher of the *Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series*, *Opera Classics Library Series*, *Opera Journeys Libretto Series*, “*A History of Opera: Milestones and Metamorphoses*,” principal lecturer for the *Opera Journeys Lecture Series* at Florida International University, a commissioned author for Season Opera guides and Program Notes for regional opera companies, and a frequent opera commentator on National Public Radio.

Nabucco

(“Nabuccodonosor”)
(“Nebuchadnezzar”)

Lyric drama (“Dramma lirico”)
in Italian
in four parts

Music
by
Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Temistocle Solera,
based on the play, *Nabuchodonosor*, by
Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis
Cornu (1836),
and the ballet based on the play,
Nabuccodonosor,
by Antonio Cortesi (1838).

Premiere: Teatro alla Scala, Milan,
March 9, 1842

Adapted from the
Opera Journeys Lecture Series
by
Burton D. Fisher

Principal Characters in <i>Nabucco</i>	Page 4
Brief Story Synopsis	Page 4
Story Narrative with Music Highlights	Page 5
Verdi and <i>Nabucco</i>	
Commentary and Analysis	Page 15

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Principal Characters in Nabucco

Nabucco (Nabucodonosor), King of Babylon	Baritone
Ismaele, nephew of Sedecia, King of Jerusalem	Tenor
Zaccaria, High Priest of the Hebrews	Bass
Abigaille, a slave who is presumed to be Nabucco's first daughter	Soprano
Fenena, daughter of Nabucco	Soprano
The High Priest of Baal	Bass
Abdallo, elderly officer of the King of Babylon	Tenor
Anna, Zaccaria's sister	Soprano

The Hebrew Exiles, including Levites (Priests)
and Temple Virgins,
Babylonian and Hebrew soldiers, Babylonian women,
Babylonian Priests (magi),
and people of the Kingdom of Babylon.

TIME: 587 BC

PLACE: Jerusalem and Babylon

Brief Story Synopsis

In the holy Temple of Jerusalem, the prophet Zaccaria comforts the Hebrews, urging them to pray as Nabucco and the invading Babylonian forces approach. The Hebrew Ismaele is in love with Fenena, Nabucco's daughter, who has converted to the worship of Jehovah, the Hebrew God; Ismaele rejects the love of Abigaille, Nabucco's illegitimate elder daughter.

Nabucco arrives at the Temple in triumph. Zaccaria has taken Fenena hostage, and threatens to kill her if Nabucco profanes the holy Temple. Ismaele seizes Zaccaria's dagger and releases Fenena. Nabucco orders the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Hebrews to Babylon.

In Babylon, during Nabucco's absence, Abigaille discovers a document proving that she is not Nabucco's legitimate daughter. The High Priest of Baal informs her that Fenena has declared herself regent and has ordered the liberation of the Exiles. Abigaille vows to revolt and seize the throne from Fenena.

Nabucco returns. He proclaims himself king and god, whereupon a lightning bolt strikes him down, and he loses his sanity. Abigaille seizes the crown that falls from his head.

Abigaille dupes Nabucco into signing an order to execute the Exiles, including Fenena. Nabucco, imprisoned in his own palace, prays for forgiveness to Jehovah, and suddenly his senses are restored.

Nabucco and his soldiers save Fenena and the Exiles from execution. Abigaille has taken poison, but before dying she repents and begs forgiveness from Jehovah. Zaccaria crowns Nabucco king of kings.

Story Narrative with Music Highlights:**Overture:**

The Overture to *Nabucco* is comprised of themes from the opera, its opening music intended to convey the steadfastness of the Hebrew Exiles in the face of persecution. The themes included are: the “Il maledetto” chorus of Part II in which the Hebrews condemn Ismaele; the “Va, pensiero” chorus in which the Exiles express their yearning to return to their homeland; the chorus of Babylonian priests in Part II, “Noi già sparso abbiamo fama” (“We’ve already spread the rumor”); the stretta concluding Part I; and the duet of Part III between Nabucco and Abigaille. A repeat of “Il maledetto” forms the coda of the Overture.

Part I: “Jerusalem”

“Thus saith the Lord: Behold I will give this city into the hands of the king of Babylon: he will burn it with fire.”
(Jeremiah - Chapter 34)

The year is 586 B.C. Inside the holy Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, the Hebrews (of the southern kingdom of Judah) lament the horror of their impending fate; they shrink in terror as Nabucco and the Babylonian army advance toward the Temple, and call upon their God to defend their holy Temple.

The terrified Hebrews, Levites (Priests), and Temple Virgins pray for deliverance. Their despair transforms to hope: that Jehovah will prevent Nabucco from capturing the Temple,

“Gli arredi festivi giù cadano infranti”

Allegro mosso
HEBREWS, LEVITES, TEMPLE VIRGINS

Gli ar-re - di fe - sti - vi giù ca - da - no in-fran - ti, il
The holy relics will be ravaged,
pop - pol di Giu - da di lut - to s'am - man - ti!
the people of Israel must hide in shame!

“I candidi veli, fanciulle, squarciate”

Un poco meno mosso
LEVITES

I can - di - di ve - li, fan-ciul - le, squar - cia - te, te
The white veils, young women,
sup - pli - ci brac - cia gri - dan - do le - va - te;
raise your arms in supplication;

“Gran Nume, che voli sull’ali dei venti”

TEMPLE VIRGINS



Gran Nu - me, che vo - li sull'a - le dei ven - ti, che il
Great God, who flies on the wings of the wind,
fol - gor spri - glo - ni dai mem - bi fre - men - ti,

Zaccaria, a Hebrew prophet, exhorts his people to trust in God, rallying them with assurances that Jehovah has performed miracles for them in the past: He delivered them from bondage in Egypt, and He will deliver them from the threatening Babylonians.

“D’Egitto là sui lidi”

Andante Maestoso
ZACCARIAH



D'E - gi - to là sui li - di E - gli a Mosè diè vi - ta;
He gave life to Moses on Egyptian shores;

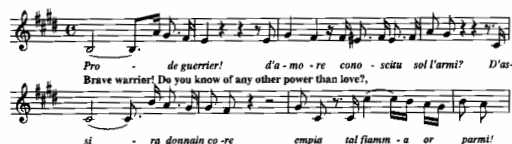
Ismaele, a nephew of the king of Jerusalem, informs the Hebrews of the imminent arrival of Nabucco’s armies at the Temple. Zaccaria has taken Nabucco’s daughter Fenena hostage; Ismaele, secretly in love with Fenena, is assigned to guard her. Zaccaria again exhorts his people to have faith: “Come notte a sol fulgente” (“Like the night before the shining sun”).

Zaccaria and the Hebrews leave the Temple. Ismaele and Fenena express their love for each other. Ismaele had been the Judean Ambassador to Babylon. He was imprisoned, but escaped with Fenena’s help. Ismaele now offers to protect Fenena, obtain her freedom, and guide her to safety,

Abigaille, Fenena’s elder sister, suddenly appears; she is, brandishing a sword at the head of Babylonian soldiers who are disguised as Hebrews. Abigaille boldly announces that she has captured the Temple. Abigaille sees Fenena and Ismaele embraced and becomes outraged; she is also in love with Ismaele and is overcome by jealousy. She mocks Ismaele, taunting him with her victory, and vowing vengeance for his betrayal of her.

“Prode guerrier!”

Lento
ABIGAILLE



Pro - de guerrier! d'a - mo - re cono - scitu sol l'armi? D'as -
Brave warrior! Do you know of any other power than love?
si - ra donnain co - re empia tal fiamm - a or parmi!

An melodious andante trio blends the voices of Abigaille, Ismaele and Fenena. Abigaille reveals her passionate love for Ismaele, admitting that she would have surrendered her kingdom for him, but now that he has betrayed her, only death awaits him: “Io t’amava!” (“I loved you!”) Abigaille offers to save Ismaele and the Hebrews if he returns her love. Ismaele declares that he is prepared to sacrifice his life, but not his love for Fenena. Fenena reveals that she no longer worships Baal; she now worships the one true God, Jehovah, the God of Israel.

Zaccaria and the Hebrews return to the Temple, fearing the imminent arrival of Nabucco and his army. Babylonian soldiers appear and immediately disarm the Hebrews. As Zaccaria prays to God to defend the Temple, Nabucco enters the Temple on horseback. Zaccaria denounces Nabucco as a madman, warning him that he is in the house of God. Nabucco scornfully inquires: “Di Dio che parli?” (“Of which God do you speak?”)

Zaccaria seizes Nabucco’s daughter, Fenena, raises his dagger, and threatens to kill her if Nabucco desecrates the sacred Temple. Nabucco dismounts from his horse, momentarily submitting to the impassioned prophet’s anguish.

Nabucco taunts Zaccaria and the Hebrews, commanding them to tremble before his awesome power.

“Tremin gl’insani del mio furore!”

Andante
NABUCCO

The musical score is for Nabucco's aria "Tremin gl'insani del mio furore!". It is in G major, 2/4 time, and marked Andante. The score is written for a single vocal line (Nabucco) and includes piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Italian and English. The Italian lyrics are: "Tre - min gl' in - sa - ni del mi - o, del mio fu - ro - re! Let the (fools) tremble at my anger! vi - ti - me tut - ti co - drun - no, cadranno o - mai! They are all victims who shall fall!". The English lyrics are: "Let the (fools) tremble at my anger! They are all victims who shall fall!".

Each of the principal characters expresses his inner conflicts: Fenena pleads to Nabucco that she will be saved if he is merciful to the Hebrews; Ismaele, Zaccaria and the Hebrews pray to Jehovah to help them in their hour of need; Abigaille vows revenge against Ismaele; and Nabucco reaffirms his determination to destroy the children of Israel.

Nabucco commands the Hebrews to kneel, the victor taunting his victims by announcing that their God is hiding, fearful of the omnipotent Nabucco.

Enraged, Zaccaria renews his threat to stab Fenena, but he is disarmed by Ismaele, who is fearful for Fenena’s safety. The crisis over, Nabucco explodes into rage; he orders his soldiers to plunder and burn the Temple, and lead the Hebrews into captivity in Babylon.

In this moment of extroverted passion, Nabucco conveys menace; Abigaille seethes with revenge; Fenena and Ismaele plead for God’s help; and Zaccaria and the Exiles are steadfast as they curse and denounce the arrogant Nabucco and his Babylonian conquerors.

Part II - Scene 1: “L’empio” (“The Impious One”)

“Behold the whirlwind of the Lord goeth forth with fury; it shall fall upon the head of the wicked.” (Jeremiah - Chapter 30)

The defeated Hebrews have been deported to Babylon, exiled from their kingdom of Judah. While Nabucco campaigns with his armies, Fenena has been appointed Regent.

In Nabucco’s royal palace in Babylon, Abigaille appears in extreme agitation. She has heard a rumor that she is not Nabucco’s legitimate daughter, but the daughter of a slave. She has found a parchment amongst Nabucco’s belongings: the “fatal scritto” (“the fateful paper”), a document that proves the rumor to be true.

Abigaille expresses her shame, but also her realization that Fenena is not only her rival for the throne, but also her rival for Ismaele. Inflamed with jealousy, she vows that before her true birth is made known, she will destroy Fenena, Nabucco, the entire kingdom, and even herself.

Abigaille suddenly becomes sentimental when her thoughts turn to Ismaele. She expresses her despair: once she had opened her heart to Ismaele’s love, but that now he has betrayed her; she wonders if love will ever return to her.

“Anch’io dischiuso un giorno”

Andante
ABIGAILLE



Anch'i - o dischiuso un gior - no ebbi al-la gioia il co - re;
I too once opened my heart to happiness;

The Babylonian High Priest and priests of Baal appear before Abigaille in extreme agitation; they inform her that Fenena has liberated the Exiles. But, the Priests have paved the way to overturn Fenena’s perfidious act. They have spread a rumor that Nabucco has been killed in battle, and they will support Abigaille in a rebellion to seize the throne. Abigaille exuberantly accepts the Priest’s offer and vows that when she assumes power she will exact revenge against Nabucco and Fenena: the victory of a humble slave.

“Salgo già del trono aurato”

Meno mosso
ABIGAILLE



Sal - go già del trono au - ra - to io sgabel - lo insan-gui - na - to;
I now ascend the blood-stained seat of the golden throne;

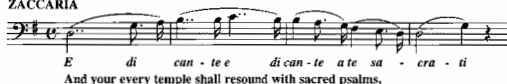
Abigaille and the priests exuberantly proclaim the victory: Baal’s vengeance.

Part II - Scene 2: Another hall in the palace.

A Levite carries the holy scrolls: the Torah. Zaccaria reaffirms his faith in Jehovah, and prays for guidance and inspiration: “Viene o Levita!” (“Come Levite!”). Zaccaria proclaims that he will be an agent of a new miracle that will destroy the infidels; his prayers bursts with profound spiritual exaltation.

“E il cante e di cante a te sacra ti”

Andante
ZACCARIA



As Zaccaria departs to meet with Fenena, Ismaele and a group of Levites assemble. The Levites accuse Ismaele of treachery: he was responsible for their captivity because he disarmed Zaccaria in the Temple in Jerusalem, enabling the hostage Fenena to be released. In despair, Ismaele pleads with the Levites, begging for mercy, even death, but the Levites insist that he is cursed by God.

“Il maledetto”

Presto
LEVITES



Anna, Zaccaria's sister, rescues Ismaele from the Levites' renunciation. She urges them to forgive Ismaele because he saved a Hebrew woman: Fenena, a convert to the worship of Jehovah.

Zaccaria and Fenena appear, and then Abdallo, a loyal old retainer of Nabucco. Abdallo warns Fenena that her life is in danger and that she must flee; Nabucco has been reported dead, and the Babylonians are calling for Abigaille to be their queen.

As the Exiles lament their misfortune, Abigaille enters with the Priests of Baal and demands that Fenena cede the crown to her. Fenena refuses. As Abigaille seizes the crown from Fenena, Nabucco and soldiers arrive, his death obviously a false report. Nabucco snatches the crown from Abigaille, places it on his head, and vents his outrage: “Dal capo mio la prendi!” (“Then take it from my head!”)

“S'appressan gl'istanti”

NABUCCO



Nabucco rages against the Babylonians: that their god has turned them into traitors against him. But, from this moment onward, there shall be no other god than Nabucco himself: “V’è un sol Nume. Il vostro Re!” (“There is one god. Your King!”)

Zaccaria rages that Nabucco is an insane fool: that Jehovah will strike him down for his blasphemy and impiety. Nabucco asserts his supreme power and orders the Hebrew Exiles put to death. Fenena pleads with Nabucco, declaring that she has now embraced the Hebrew faith and is prepared to die with the Exiles. But Nabucco is intransigent and orders all to kneel and worship him, their only god: “Giù prostrati! Non son più re, son Dio!” (“Down! Kneel! I am no longer King, I am god!”)

A deafening thunderbolt strikes the crown from Nabucco’s head and he is thrown to the ground: heavenly vengeance against Nabucco’s vain and presumptuous proclamation. Nabucco becomes confounded, unable to understand what supernatural force threw him to the ground and removed his crown. He becomes disoriented and begins to mutter incoherently, his sense of reason leaving him. He has hallucinations: he is being crushed, attacked, pursued, assaulted, and the sky is falling as he is being surrounded by phantoms with flaming swords.

He calls to Fenena, inquiring why his daughter does not come to his aid in this desperate time of need.

“Oh! Mia figlia! E tu e tu pur anco”

Adagio
NABUCCO



Oh! Mia fi - glia! E tu e tu pur an-co non soc - corri al de - bil fianco?
Oh, my daughter! You also do not come to my aid?

As Nabucco collapses, Zaccaria proclaims: “Il cielo ha punito il vanitor!” (“Heaven has punished the foolish boaster!”)

Abigaille rises to the occasion and seizes Nabucco’s crown: “Ma del popolo di Belo fia spento lo splendor!” (“But for the people of Baal the splendor remains!”)

Part III – Scene 1: “La profezia” (The Prophecy)

“Therefore the wild beasts of the desert shall dwell in Babylon, and the owls shall dwell therein.” (Jeremiah - Chapter 50)

In the throne room of the palace, Abigaille, now regent, is seated on the throne, surrounded by her retinue who praise their new queen. The High Priest of Baal persuades Abigaille to execute the Exiles, including Fenena, who has betrayed Baal. Abigaille is presented with a document to sign that will authorize their execution. She hesitates to sign it.

Abdallo leads Nabucco into the throne room; he is weak and disheveled. He sees Abigaille seated on the throne and becomes outraged. Abigaille dismisses everyone to be alone with Nabucco.

Nabucco condemns Abigaille as a fraud and insolent imposter. Abigaille defends her actions: that she has been the custodian of Nabucco's throne during his illness; it was the people's will to rebel against Fenena.

Abigaille proceeds to dupe Nabucco into signing the death sentence for the Hebrew Exiles. She urges him to sign the document, but he hesitates, feeling some incomprehensible force restraining him. Abigaille taunts Nabucco: that his hesitation demonstrates his cowardice; that he fears the Hebrews. Nabucco immediately snatches the document from her and signs it. Abigaille erupts into delirious exultation; with the imminent death of the Exiles and Fenena, her last obstacle to achieve absolute power will have been removed.

Nabucco suddenly inquires why Fenena, his flesh and blood, must die. Abigaille justifies Fenena's fate; she has betrayed Baal and must die. Nabucco despairs.

Nabucco reveals that Abigaille is not of royal blood, but rather the daughter of slaves. Abigaille unveils the document, the "fatal scritto," and insolently tears it into pieces before Nabucco's eyes.

As Abigaille hands the execution order to guards, Nabucco laments the shame that has afflicted him, and his fall from power.

"Oh di qual'onta aggravasi"

Andante
NABUCCO



(Oh di qual'onta aggra - vasi que - sto mio crin ca - nu - to!)

(What deep shame afflicts my ageing soul!)

Abigaille celebrates the glory that she has longed for: a throne that is worth far more than a father. All the people will kneel before her.

"Oh dell'ambita Gloria"

Andante
ABIGAILLE



(Oh dell'ambita glo - ria giorno tu sei ve - nu - to!)

(The day of coveted glory I longed for has arrived!)

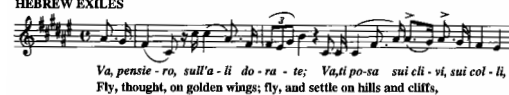
Trumpets are heard. Abigaille informs Nabucco that they signal the imminent death of the Exiles; the people he has just condemned by his signature. Nabucco has been betrayed. He rouses himself and calls for his guards, but Abigaille bitterly and scornfully informs him that it is futile; he is a prisoner.

“Deh perdona”Allegro moderato
NABUCCO

Nabucco begs Abigaille to spare Fenena's life, but she is indifferent and unmoved by his entreaties. Nabucco is in despair, scorned and dishonored by a slave. He pleads for mercy.

Part III, Scene 2: “Coro e Profezia” (“Chorus and Prophecy”)

On the banks of the Euphrates river, the Exiles yearn to return to their homeland: the banks of the Jordan, and their sacred city of Jerusalem.

“Va pensiero”Largo
HEBREW EXILES

Zaccaria chides the Exiles for lamenting. He instills them with courage, a vision of the future in which he predicts the fall of Babylon and their imminent liberation.

“Del futuro nel bujo”Andante mosso
ZACCARIA

Zaccaria's sermon rouses the Exiles. Their faith has been renewed, and they express their defiance of their Babylonian conquerors and their confidence in a future of happiness.

Part IV, Scene 1: “L’idolo infranto” (“The Broken Idol”)

“Baal is confounded: his images are broken in pieces.”
(Jeremiah - Chapter 50)

In the royal apartments, shouts from outside awaken Nabucco from a nightmare. He looks outside and sees Fenena being led to execution. He rushes to the doors, only to find them locked. Overcome by his powerlessness as a prisoner, he falls to his knees and prays to the Hebrew God for forgiveness and his daughter’s rescue. He vows that the holy Temple shall be restored if Jehovah clears his mind of its confusion; if Jehovah will rescue him from his terrible anguish he will destroy Baal.

“Dio di Giuda!”

Largo
NABUCCO



Di - o di Giu - da! Fa - ra, il tem - pio
God of the Hebrews! The altar, the temple.

Suddenly, Nabucco feels his senses returning. In thankfulness for Jehovah’s answer to his prayers, he proclaims his new faith: “True and omnipotent God, henceforth I shall worship you forever.”

Nabucco rushes to a door in an attempt to force it open. He is met by his faithful retainer Abdallo and soldiers. Abdallo tries to dissuade the sick king from exposing himself to the horror of his daughter’s execution. Nabucco demands his sword and tries to convince Abdallo and the soldiers that his mind is no longer deranged. Abdallo’s faith in Nabucco is restored and he presents him with his sword. All rush to rescue Fenena, vowing death to the rebellious Abigaille and the Priests of Baal: “Cadran, cadranno i perfidi” (“The traitors shall fall.”)

Part IV - Scene 2: In the Hanging Gardens of Babylon

The High Priest of Baal stands by an altar. A funeral march accompanies the condemned Exiles and Fenena as they march to their execution.

Zaccaria comforts the Exiles. He tells Fenena that she will find peace in Heaven. Fenena invokes her resolve in her new faith with a touching and moving prayer.

“Oh dischiuso è il firmamento”

Andante
FENENA



Oh di - schiu - so è il firmamen - to! Al Signor lo spir - to u - ne - la.
The heavens have opened, and my soul yearns for the Lord.

Shouts of “Long live Nabucco” are heard. Nabucco and his soldiers arrive, just in time to rescue Fenena and the Exiles.

Nabucco orders the idol of Baal destroyed; the statue mysteriously shatters into pieces. Nabucco order the release of the Exiles, and that a new Temple be built to Jehovah. He praises Jehovah and begs Fenena to kneel in homage. All the Exiles and Babylonians join in a triumphant hymn in praise of Jehovah: “Immenso Jeovha” (“Great Jehovah”)

Abigaille, defeated in her palace rebellion, has taken poison. She arrives, supported by two soldiers. She is on the verge of death, which she admits is a just punishment for her crimes. Abigaille repents for her betrayal and prays that she not be damned: “Solleva Iddio l’afflito” (“God lift up the afflicted.”). She asks Nabucco to bless Fenena and Ismaele, and implores Jehovah to forgive her. Abigaille dies.

“Su me morente esanime”

Andante moderato
ABIGAILLE



Su me morente e - sa - nime discen - da il tuo per - do - na!
Dying and weak, may your mercy descend upon me!

Zaccaria promises Nabucco great glory as a follower of Jehovah: “Servendo a Jeovha sarai de’ regli il re!” (“Servant of Jehovah, you shall be king of kings!”)

Commentary and Analysis
Verdi and Nabucco

In ancient Greece, music was considered a holy and divine gift from the Muses, the daughters of Zeus who inspired humanity to dance and sing; the word music derives from the Greek word “mousike,” meaning the art of the Muses. Music possessed the power to transform, to fill and shape silence, to change moods, and to express that which existed beyond words. And by uniting humanity with sounds and music, man could achieve transcendence. Music also possessed logical order, its mathematical relationships considered synonymous with the divine cosmic order of the universe; therefore, music represented the metaphysical key to truth and beauty.

The ancient Greeks also believed that the human voice was a sacred and divine gift; it was considered the most noble and ideal musical instrument that possessed the capability to express the entire range of human emotions, passions, aspirations, yearnings and desires.

In the early seventeenth century, in Florence, Italy, a think-tank of intellectuals known as the Camerata, sought to recreate what they believed were the techniques of ancient Greek drama: the integration of music to realize the text and intensify the drama; they succeeded, and modern opera was born.

But during the next two centuries, when most opera was dominated by the Italians, the art form surrendered the ideals that inspired its Camerata founders; opera had become a showcase for singers rather than music drama, or an idealized integration of text and music. The opera stage was dominated by castrati singers, males who were surgically altered in their youth in order to retain their high vocal ranges: these castrati became opera’s superstars, mesmerizing their audiences with their vocal purity, impassioned bravura, virtuosity, and technical fireworks. The singer dominated the opera stage, his talents considered a magnificent blend of art and science; but most operas were merely an amalgam of showpieces for these charismatic singers.

Bel canto or “beautiful singing” was the description applied to the virtuoso singing during the golden age of Italian opera, generally from the middle of the seventeenth century through the first half of the nineteenth century. The bel canto singer emphasized beauty of sound, fine legato phrasing, a masterful breath control, agility in florid passages, and an effortless realization of high notes. The voice was the supreme vehicle to create and eloquently express dramatic elements; it was accomplished through inflections of the vocal line, dynamics, ornamentation, and acrobatics or feats of vocal fireworks and virtuosity.

But vocal pyrotechnics superseded heightened dramatic and theatrical elements, and generally, the underlying literary values of librettos were often secondary considerations: many librettos were humdrum and hackneyed, even though written by extremely talented and original craftsmen who often

adapted their stories from acclaimed plays and novels; Schiller, Shakespeare, Lord Byron, Hugo, Scott, and Bulwer Lytton. But the goal of opera was pure entertainment rather than idealized art: the dramas rarely contained any organic relationship with their underlying music, or integration of text and music.

Giuseppe Verdi began composing opera during the first half of the nineteenth century, a time when the Italian public was thoroughly enamored by the bel canto genre. The most prominent composer of the era was Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868), the composer of 37 extremely popular operas, who dominated the opera landscape in both the opera buffa and opera seria genres. Rossini's success influenced the traditions and conventions of his contemporary composers, particularly Donizetti and Bellini. Ultimately, Rossini became the architect of early nineteenth-century Italian bel canto opera, the creator of the master plan that revitalized and fashioned opera's structure and set its standards.

Rossini's dramatic truth was expressed with dignity and sincerity: straightforward tonal harmonies, colorful orchestral techniques with rich and florid instrumental textures, and an ornamented and embellished vocal writing that included roulades and flourishes. Some of Rossini's innovations were not new, but his successful application of those techniques made them de rigueur for his contemporaries.

Structurally, operas were comprised of "numbers" or "set pieces" (arias, duets, trios, ensembles) that were integrated with accompanied or dry recitative, the recitative the vehicle for narration as well as action. One of Rossini's most popular conventions was the double aria, an aria divided into two sections, their sole contrast that of tempo. In addition, there were many cabalettas, simple or short arias for the principal singer; cabalettas, or brisk last sections of an aria or duet, that at times included several sections; and strettas, an acceleration of the tempo to create a sense of climax. In Rossini's acclaimed opere serie, *Mosè* and *William Tell*, choral sections were extremely prominent. By design, rather than technical limitation, the orchestra was generally reduced to its utmost simplicity, often just an accompanist: in the bel canto genre, melody dominated, and by necessity, the orchestra generally became subdued when the singer was singing, regardless of the dramatic elements.

Rossini's contemporaries — Donizetti and Bellini — dutifully followed the master's guidelines, although each developed his own unique musical personality and signature. Their bel canto scores were saturated with showpieces for singers, and accompaniments set to dance rhythms were the rule rather than the exception.

It was this Rossinian bel canto style that Richard Wagner found intolerable and excessive, an Italianism that he considered an artistic evil. Wagner became obsessed to rescue and redeem the world from those superfluities; the devils were Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and, of course, Verdi. Hector

Berlioz would echo Wagner's denunciation of Italian bel canto with earnestness: "Music of the Italian is a sensual pleasure and nothing more. For this noble expression of the mind they have hardly more respect than for the art of cooking. They want a score that, like a plate of macaroni, can be assimilated immediately without having to think about it, or even pay attention to it."

Giuseppe Verdi began composing operas at a time when bel canto was the rage with audiences. But over the next half of the nineteenth century, Verdi would add a new spirit to opera, introducing a new thrust of power and passion through his music. As Verdi's art matured, Italian opera would return to the original ideals of its Camerata founders: words realized through the power of music.

In 1837, the 24-year old Giuseppe Verdi began studies with Vincenzo Lavigna, La Scala's principal conductor. Lavigna was a renowned teacher, who laid the groundwork for the young composer's career with intensive studies of harmony and counterpoint.

In November 1838, Bartolomeo Merelli, the impresario of La Scala, was persuaded to mount Verdi's first opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*, a premiere largely attributable to the persuasive efforts of the popular Milanese soprano, Giuseppina Strepponi, at the time, Merelli's mistress. (Strepponi and Verdi would later become lovers and marry years later; she was at his side a half century later at the premiere of Verdi's final opera, *Falstaff* in 1893.)

Oberto's warm and favorable reception led to 14 performances during La Scala's autumn season. The young composer was further encouraged after Ricordi bought the score for publication, as well as a contract he received from Merelli for three more operas.

Oberto relates a struggle for power in northern Italy during the thirteenth century. Its libretto, earlier written by Antonio Piazza, but later completed by the 20-year old Temistocle Solera (1815-1878) reflects the typical weaknesses of humdrum librettos of the era: ultimately, its story became secondary to the quality of the underlying music and its inherent vocal demands.

In the score, Verdi was not forging any new paths or breaking new ground; he was composing within the existing forms and conventions of the bel canto era, largely those created by Rossini. *Oberto* is a numbers opera, with each aria or set-piece introduced by accompanied recitative; there were cabaletta's for each aria, and a chorus introduced each scene. But even though certain elements of the music score echoed Bellinian delicacy and grace, as well as allusions to Rossini and Donizetti, much of it bore Verdi's own signature: the score possessed vigor and energy, a wealth of expressive and melodic vocal lines, and a clear demonstration of his ability to characterize in musical terms. *Oberto* was Verdi's first opera, but far from his last; it represented a blueprint for a composing career that would evolve and mature,

ultimately dominating Italian opera throughout most of the nineteenth century.

Verdi's second opera, *Un Giorno di Regno* (1840) ("A Day in the Reign"), was a comedy, an opera buffa that Verdi designated "melodrama giocoso," an implication that it was a combination of serious drama and comedy. It is a story based loosely on an incident that occurred during the War of the Polish Succession in 1733. The libretto was written by Felice Romani, noted for his librettos for Rossini's *Il Turco in Italia* (1814), Bellini's *Il Pirata* (1827), *I Capuleti ed i Montecchi* (1830), *La Sonnambula* (1831) and *Norma* (1831), and Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (1830), *L'Elisir d'Amore* (1832) and *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833). Romani's libretto was a reworking of his earlier libretto *Il Finto Stanislao* ("The False Stanislaus").

During the composition of *Un Giorno di Regno*, Verdi suffered a shocking personal tragedy: the death of his wife Margherita from encephalitis. Earlier his two children had died: his one year-old daughter Virginia (1838), and his son Icilio, who died just before the premiere of *Oberto*. Verdi became distraught and despairing: he tried unsuccessfully to be released from his contract with Merelli, but was forced to complete the comic opera during a time when his soul was tormented by personal tragedies.

In general, Verdi's music for *Un Giorno di Regno* possessed a sureness and confidence; its vocal writing exuded charm, although much of it echoed the styles of Rossini and Donizetti. The opera premiered at La Scala in September 1840 and was a devastating failure: a hostile audience erupted into much booing and hissing, and the press reviews were unfavorable. All future performances were cancelled. In retrospect, Verdi's *Un Giorno di Regno* had been a mediocrity of opera buffa, a genre that the composer would not address until the very end of his career in his final opera, *Falstaff*.

Like *Un Giorno di Regno*, with the singular success of *Oberto*, Verdi had been king for a day: a short moment of glory. Verdi concluded that in both his personal and professional life, his dreams had crumbled: he was overcome by bitterness by his failures and sulked in deep depression; he announced his determination never to compose again.

But the failure of *Un Giorno di Regno* did not diminish Merelli's faith in the young composer. Merelli led the young twenty-seven year old Verdi into temptation by urging him to read the libretto of *Nabucodonosor* (later shortened to *Nabucco*), a text written by the young poet Temistocle Solera, Verdi's librettist for the earlier *Oberto*. Solera's libretto was adapted from *Nabuchodonosor*, a French play by August Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu (1836), and the scenario of the ballet *Nabuccodonosor* also based on the play by Antonio Cortesi (1838). The libretto was

originally intended for the young Prussian composer, Otto Nicolai, but he contemptuously rejected it in favor of *Il Proscritto*, which ironically was a dismal failure at its La Scala premiere in March 1841.

Verdi's account of his inspiration to compose *Nabucco* has become opera legend. After Merelli gave him the libretto he returned home; with indifference, he violently threw the manuscript on a table. But when the paper rolled itself open, Verdi found himself staring at the line, "Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate." He began reading other passages and became deeply moved by the text's biblical grandeur and dramatic intensity, claiming in later life that he had memorized the libretto by morning. He was ostensibly firm in his resolve never to compose again, but the qualities he perceived in the libretto began to inspire him, and slowly, he overcame his resistance. Over the next months, Merelli pursued his crusade to coax the young composer. Eventually, a note was transformed into a musical phrase, and those phrases were transformed into an opera score. Later in life, Verdi reminisced: "With this opera, my artistic career may be said to have begun."

Nabucco premiered in March 1842 and was an enormous triumph; it was revived that autumn for a record 57 performances. Giuseppina Strepponi, the woman Verdi would marry seventeen years later, although in poor voice, sang the demanding dramatic soprano role of the villainess Abigaille. The audience erupted into wild enthusiasm at the conclusion of Part I, but their fervor exploded into delirium as the performance progressed. The Part III - Scene 2 "Chorus and Prophecy," the Hebrew Exiles' "Va, pensiero" chorus climaxed their enthusiasm: the Italians in the audience immediately associated their oppression under Austrian authoritarianism with the imprisoned Hebrew Exiles in Babylonia. Despite strict police regulations against encores (for fear of demonstrations), the audience's demand for a repetition of "Va, pensiero" was granted. *Nabucco* was immediately ennobled as a patriotic opera, an allegory for the Italian's dream of a united and free nation. With *Nabucco*, Verdi became the inspirational composer of the Italian Risorgimento, and to the delight of his compatriots, he would incorporate emotional anthems for Italian liberation in his 12 subsequent operas.

Verdi died in 1901. In his will, he had instructed that his funeral be simple; it was attended by just a handful of few people, and there was to be no music. But at the cemetery, those few present erupted into humming "Va, pensiero." A month later, there was a second funeral in which Verdi's body and that of his second wife, Giuseppina Strepponi, were transferred from the cemetery to the old musicians home he had endowed at Sant'Agata. It has been reported that half of Milan's population of 200,000 lined the street, and Arturo Toscanini, standing outside the chapel, led an emotional chorus of 800 in "Va, pensiero."

Nabucco is loosely based on Old Testament references to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (604-562), mentioned prominently in the books of Jeremiah (21—52), Daniel (1:1—5:18), and also in 2 Kings (24:1—25:22), Ezra (1:7—6:5), and Ezekiel (26:7—30:10).

Around the year 1000 BC, the Fertile Crescent of the Near East comprised Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Assyria and Babylonia; the Israelites had established themselves in Palestine some 300 years earlier. From 1000 to 750, the Assyrians attempted to conquer the entire region; these were wars that were primarily fought for the control of agricultural land.

According to biblical history, David united the southern kingdom of Judah with the northern kingdom of Israel (1004), primarily to unite a strong force to oppose foreign invasions. Afterwards, David's son Solomon became king of all Israel (997), but generated such hostility that the united kingdom became untenable; the kingdoms of Israel and Judah each became independent, reverting to their own royal houses (926).

In 744, Tiglath-pileser III ascended the Assyrian throne, determined to transform his old kingdom into an empire; it was the beginning of Assyrian imperialism. In 722, the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and divided the territory politically by transporting most of the population to Assyria where they were assimilated into the surrounding population; the Assyrians recolonized Israel, which now became Samaria. It was the first great tragedy of Jewish history: the northern people of Israel were forcibly deported to Assyria and the kingdom of Israel ceased to exist; the northern tribes were dispersed and moved from history to myth.

In the south, the kingdom of Judah was terrified by the collapse of Israel and feared a similar fate. The holy city of Jerusalem survived a fierce siege by the Assyrians in 701, presumably rescued by a violent outbreak of the bubonic plague that struck the Assyrian camp. The kingdom of Judah's rulers sought safety in various alliances, particularly Egypt. But it was also a time in which the prophets emerged to awaken the children of Israel to their collective conscience: the prophet Isaiah warned that defeat by the Assyrians would lead to national destruction and exile, a doom that represented their God Jehovah's punishment for their continued apostasy, idolatry, and disobedience to the law.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire began to arise in 625. Nabopolassar, father of Nebuchadnezzar, was the founder of the Neo-Babylonian, or Chaldean dynasty; apparently a general appointed by the Assyrians, but who successfully rebelled against them. With the collapse of the great Assyrian city of Nineveh in 612, the new power of Babylon began its domination of the territory.

Nebuchadnezzar succeeded his father as king (604-562 BC), ruling Babylon for 42 years. He became a powerful and autocratic despot, conquering surrounding nations, and adopting the same policy in his wars as earlier Assyrian kings: deporting whole populations after he defeated them.

Another prophet emerged. Jeremiah warned his people of the growing and menacing army of Nebuchadnezzar: that God would punish his people for their wickedness; the “Jeremiad.” But the prophecies materialized, and Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies invaded and defeated the kingdom of Judah.

According to the biblical account, Nebuchadnezzar accomplished three deportations of the Judeans:

In 605, the First Deportation, which would have included Daniel along with other royal personages (Daniel 1:1-4).

In 597, the Second deportation occurred after the Judean King Jehoiachin surrendered. There are conflicting reports in the Old Testament: he was either defeated and carried off to Babylon, or according to Jeremiah (22:19), dragged from Jerusalem and killed. After ransacking Solomon’s Temple, Nebuchadnezzar made Mattaniah (now Zedekiah), Jehoiachin’s uncle, king over Judah and Jerusalem.

In 586, the Third Deportation, after Zedekiah’s failed rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, attributed to Egypt’s failure to provide promised military aid. The city of Jerusalem and Solomon’s holy Temple were destroyed. The chief priests were put to death and Zedekiah was blinded, carried in fetters to Babylon (2 Kings 25:1-21). Nebuchadnezzar appointed a governor, Gedaliah, to rule the remaining people of the land.

Nebuchadnezzar’s deportation of the Judeans guaranteed the submission of a defiant territory, but it also provided him with skilled artisans, craftsmen, and slave laborers for his extensive building projects. The Book of Daniel significantly records Nebuchadnezzar’s pride in Babylon, a royal city that was saturated with monuments to Nebuchadnezzar’s power: the Ishtar gate, the towering ziggurat, Marduk’s temple, and the most famous achievement of all, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. It is believed that Nebuchadnezzar built the gardens for his wife, the Medean queen Amyitis, who had grown up in the midst of lofty green mountains, and found it difficult to adjust to the flat, hot plains of Babylon. To ease her homesickness, Nebuchadnezzar constructed the elaborate gardens and terraces, providing an ingenious irrigation system to pump water from the Euphrates.

As Jeremiah was a prophet to the people in Jerusalem and Judah, Ezekiel, his younger contemporary, was the prophet of the Judeans in exile. Babylon was far richer economically than Judah, and many exiles, even though Babylonian captives, enjoyed privileges that enabled them to rise to positions of prominence and wealth. The Babylonians still allowed Jehoiachin to bear the title of king of Judah, a sovereign without a realm. But many of the exiles were poor, and naturally became discouraged and afflicted with nostalgia. Accordingly, the prophet Ezekiel brought them a message of hope, a future in which Israel’s earthly kingdom would be redeemed by the Messiah.

Nebuchadnezzar boasted about his power with arrogance. According to the Book of Daniel, he was stricken at the height of his power and pride by God's judgment. Eventually, he was driven from power and lived with the beasts of the field, eating grass like an ox.

After Nebuchadnezzar's long reign, decline set in quickly. He was succeeded by a series of weak rulers: first by his son Amel-Marduk (562-560 BC), referred to in the Bible as "Evil-merodach," a Hebrew transliteration that sounds like the English word evil. Within four years, Amel-Marduk was slain by his brother-in-law, who in turn reigned only four years; he was succeeded by son, who was murdered after reigning only a few months.

Cyrus II, called "the Great," considered the founder of the Persian Empire, began a rapid conquest of the Near East in 559, and within 20 years, Babylon fell to him. In 538, Cyrus declared an edict that commanded the Judeans to return to their homeland.

Temistocle Solera adapted the libretto of *Nabucco* essentially from the French play, *Nabuchodonosor*, by August Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu (1836), and the scenario of the ballet *Nabuccodonosor*, by Antonio Cortesi (1838); both were theatrical works of pure melodrama that were very loosely based upon Old Testament references to the historical Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar and his subjugation of the kingdom of Judah; with the exception of Nebuchadnezzar, all the other characters in the story were inventions of the various authors.

Certain historical elements of the Verdi/Solera *Nabucco* story defy historical fact: the Book of Daniel reveals Nebuchadnezzar's power, vanity and arrogance, but not his conversion to the worship of Jehovah, a key element of the opera's conclusion. And Nebuchadnezzar did not free the Hebrew Exiles; King Cyrus of Persia liberated them after his conquest of Babylonia (538).

Solera's most inventive plot alteration from his original sources is the opera's sense of redemption and reconciliation. In the play, Fenena had been executed along with the Exiles, but restored to life by divine intervention; in the opera libretto, Nabucco arrives in time to save Fenena just before she is about to be executed. In the finale of the play, Nabucco kills Abigaille, but in the opera libretto, Abigaille has taken poison, an action that is not explained in depth, but no doubt reflects the failure of her rebellion against Nabucco. However, Abigaille is forgiven and redeemed after the announcement of her worship of Jehovah.

But Solera's greatest innovation was in making the Hebrew Exiles the central focus of the drama, and their verses become even more profound with Verdi's musical underscoring. The choral centerpiece of the opera, the "Va pensiero," has no equivalent in the source ballet or play. The "Prophecy," in which the chorus appears, was injected at Verdi's insistence; Solera had originally written a love scene for Ismaele and Fenena.

Nabucco is a story about war: Giuseppe Verdi is the story's journalist, reporting events through words that are realized through his dramatic musical inventions. Nebuchadnezzar's aggression in the fifth century BC terrorized weaker nations; like his Assyrian predecessors, his objective was to plunder the resources of other nations, and ultimately deport their inhabitants back to Babylon as slave laborers. Indeed, as the opera story accurately relates, the southern kingdom of Judah fell to Nebuchadnezzar in the fifth century, the holy Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and most of the population was exiled to Babylonia.

The opera story provides a panorama of human conflicts, its scope approaching the biblical grandeur that had so inspired Verdi when he first read Solera's libretto. The heroes of the story are the Hebrew Exiles, whose undaunted faith pervades the entire drama. And in the end, it is the Exiles' faith that triumphs: monotheism and Jehovah are the victors over the pagan Baal. And finally, Nebuchadnezzar becomes a convert and grants the Exiles their freedom, an historical untruth but a plot twist that serves the story's intent to reward the Exiles for their faith.

But the dynamic plot also portrays unbridled individual passions: the love triangle involving Fenena, Abigaille, and Ismaele, that triggers not only Abigaille's jealousy, but the extreme despair of a spurned woman; the love of Fenena and Ismaele, unusually limited in scenes exposing their passion; and Abigaille's obsession for power and revenge, which is clothed in the religious rivalry between the worshippers of Baal and Jehovah, but is nevertheless the driving counterforce to Nabucco's power.

But the true underlying essence of *Nabucco* remains the plight of the Hebrew Exiles; they are the emotional core of the opera as well as the opera's heroes; it is their yearning for freedom that was consciously or subconsciously the muse that inspired Verdi's impassioned musical inventions. And the Exile chorus, "Va pensiero," the musical centerpiece of the opera, is an inspired writing that immediately spoke with passion and reached deep into the soul of Verdi's oppressed Italian compatriots: "O mia patria sì bella e perduta, o membranza sì cara e fatal" ("Oh my country, so beautiful and lost, oh remembrance, so dear and fatal.")

The story of *Nabucco* appealed to Verdi's sense of human ideals as well as his sensitivity to the plight of Italians living under the Austrian yoke. Verdi was temperamentally and ideologically a man of Enlightenment ideals: throughout his life he expressed his abomination of absolute power and deified civil liberty; those ideals were manifested in a passionate crusade against every form of tyranny, whether social, political, or ecclesiastical. *Nabucco* provided Verdi with a platform to express his fears of absolute power, and by inference, his profound idealism and noble conception of humanity. But certainly, *Nabucco*'s impassioned underlying theme, the yearning for freedom, touched the emotions of Verdi's Italian compatriots during its time, as well as today. In many respects, *Nabucco* bears a crown similar to Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1805): humanity's yearning for freedom.

In Rossini's French operas, choral elements were used with great impact and effect: *Le Siège de Corinthe*, *Guillaume Tell*, and *Mosè*. Similarly, *Nabucco* is an opera in which the chorus of Exiles is the main protagonist: undaunted in their faith in God, and impassioned in their plea for freedom. And later operas likewise featured the chorus as protagonist with great dramatic effect: Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1873), a music drama in which the Russian people represent the principal force in the opera, and Camille Saint-Saëns's *Samson and Delilah* (1877), its impassioned oratorio-like choruses of Israelites of Act I and II framing the heightened conflict of the spirit vs. the flesh in Act II.

Part I of *Nabucco* begins in the holy Temple in Jerusalem, the Judeans awaiting their imminent doom as Nabucco's invading armies approach. Levites, priests of the Hebrew tribe of Levi, Hebrews, and Temple Virgins, convey their despair in contrasting musical sequences, mostly unison chord harmonies. The Levites begin by conveying a somber and despairing mood: "Gli arredi festivi già cadono infranti, il popolo di Giuda di lutto s'ammanti!" ("The holy relics will be ravaged, the people of Israel must hide in shame!") The Levites, basses singing in chordal unison urge all to pray for mercy and forgiveness: "I candidi veli, fanciulle, squarciate, le supplici braccia gridando levate" ("The white veils, young women, raise your arms in supplication"). All kneel in prayer as the Temple Virgins, in rich soprano harmony with harp accompaniment, implore their God for mercy: "Gran Nume, che voli sull'ale dei venti" ("Great God, who flies on the wings of the wind.") The choral section concludes as all join with a repeat of "Gli arredi festivi."

The prophet Zaccaria, a synthesis of the biblical prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, reminds his people to trust in the Lord and maintain their faith. Zaccaria inspires his people with a sense of hope, a grandiose double aria with its first part andante, "D'Egitto là sui lidi Egli a Mosè diè vita" ("He gave life to Moses on Egyptian shores.") The second part is a cabaletta, which is magically combined with the chorus of Hebrews as they affirm their trust and faith in God: "Come notte al sol fulgente."

In Part II, Scene 2, Zaccaria intones an inspirational prayer, beginning with "Vieni o Levita" ("Come Levites"), followed by "Tu sul labbro de' veggenti fulminasti" ("You sent forth your word on the lips of the prophets"), powerful words and music in which he prays to be anointed the agent of a new miracle, its middle section exploding with profound spiritual exaltation: "E di canti e di canti a te sacrati" ("And with sacred psalms every temple shall resound with Thy praise.") But the music of Zaccaria's prayer is solemn, tranquil, and almost chamber-like in quality, set against the instrumental texture of a solo cello and divided strings.

The "Il maledetto" chorus is a lively centerpiece of Part II - Scene 2. Earlier, in Part I, Zaccaria opposed Nabucco by threatening to kill his daughter Fenena with a dagger. Ismaele seized the dagger, protecting his beloved Fenena against a

lethal threat. For that action, the Levites condemn Ismaele as a traitor: the spirited chorus, “Il maledetto non ha fratelli!” (“The damned has no brothers. No man on earth shall speak to Him!”)

In the French play, the plot twists explaining Ismaele’s love for Fenena varies slightly with the opera story. Abigail had disguised herself in order to rescue her sister Fenena from Israelite captivity. Ismaele, nephew of the King of Jerusalem, allowed the two princesses to escape because he had fallen in love with Fenena. Ismaele’s uncle, the Priest Zacharias, condemned Ismaele’s love for Fenena as blasphemous; she was a Babylonian and worshipper of the pagan Baal. In Solera’s libretto, Ismaele’s perfidy was translated into the opera’s “Il maledetto” (“The damned”).

The “Va, pensiero” chorus takes place in the “The Prophecy” in Part III - Scene 2, a set-piece based on Solera’s idea to paraphrase the psalm, “By the water of Babylon, we sat down and wept.” Verdi’s music is profoundly melancholy, reflecting the underlying sadness of the Exiles; the “Va, pensiero” is the lament of an entire people in Exile, not of a single hero or heroine, and in Verdi’s musical construction, it conveys the sense that a thousand voices are singing. Rossini described Verdi’s “Va, pensiero” chorus as a grand aria sung by sopranos, contraltos, tenors and basses. The music is uncomplicated, its phrasing built on a singular unity. However, its magic spell is no doubt conveyed through its sudden crescendos and singular rhythm. The inherent power of the chorus lies in its magnificent blend of words and music, an expression of the very soul of a dispersed people. The “Va, pensiero” concludes with a heightened sense of triumph: renewed hope, faith in the future, and a nostalgic appeal to patriotism.

Zaccaria concludes “The Prophecy” by admonishing his people to cast aside their nostalgia: their freedom will come from faith. He invokes his prophecy in an aria that seems to emulate the melodies and rhythms of “Va, pensiero,” but alternates between minor and major keys: “Dell futuro nel buio discerno ecco rotta l’indegna catena!” (“In the obscure future, I see these shameful chains broken!”)

In Part IV, Scene 2, at the conclusion of the opera the Exiles exult in their freedom in the a capella chorus, “Immenso Jeovha” (“Great Jehovah.”) Appropriately, Zaccaria intones the final words of the opera, his tribute to Nabucco for liberating the Exiles and embracing the worship of Jehovah: “Servendo a Jehovha sarai de’ regli il re!” (“Serving Jehovah, you shall be king of kings!”)

For Verdi, as well as Donizetti and Bellini, an opera was first to be conceived in terms of the voice. Beginning with *Nabucco*, Verdi’s characterizations became distinguishable by vocal archetypes; it was a technique that was unprecedented at the time, and represents one of his most striking contributions to the resources of Italian opera. Each

voice type stands out in sharp contrast to the others, and each possesses its own emotional characteristics; the voice types themselves create a tension between the characters.

Verdi virtually invented the high baritone voice (Nabucco, and later Macbeth), a dark basso cantante that he pushed to higher ranges. Verdi considered the high baritone voice lustrous, a voice possessing all the colors of the emotional spectrum, and thus the embodiment of human force and energy. The high baritone would interplay with the other voice types, but it would always remain the central force of the drama: the tenor could be lyrical, but could also be ardent or despairing; the bass could be dark and granite-like, but inflexible in purposes of good or ill; the dramatic soprano, such as Abigaille (and later Lady Macbeth), would be sharply and extravagantly drawn musically in order to heighten her dramatic presence; and in later works, beginning with *Il Trovatore* (1853), there would be the female equivalent of the baritone, the mezzo-soprano, such as the gypsy mother Azucena.

Verdi scored the role of Nabucco for his new high baritone voice, a voice that he considered possessed the power to capture the entire emotional and psychological range of the character and his personality complexities: Nabucco's initial vanity and arrogance, his rise to consciousness and awareness, and ultimately his human compassion and benevolence.

In Part I, Nabucco rides into the Judean sacred Temple on horseback, a vain and arrogant conqueror, and a cruel and tyrannical despot. A momentary crisis develops when Zaccaria threatens Nabucco's daughter Fenena with a dagger. Nabucco dismounts and proceeds to express his hostility and rage towards his defeated enemy: "Tremin gl' insani del mio, del mio furore!" ("Let the fools tremble at my anger! They are all victims who shall fall!")

After Ismaele seizes the dagger from Zaccaria, Nabucco renews his fierce, implacable fury; he condemns the insolent Hebrews and orders their holy Temple ransacked. The Hebrews respond by cursing Nabucco as an infidel and invoking Jehovah's wrath. Part I concludes in a tempestuous *stretta*; each of the characters expresses individual conflicts and passions that are clearly distinguishable within Verdi's brilliant ensemble.

At the end of Part II - Scene 2, Nabucco suddenly appears after false rumors of his death. He becomes infuriated by Abigaille's betrayal and angrily seizes the crown from her: "Dal capo mio la prendi!" ("I take my crown!"), each character expressing individual emotions in a quartet in the style of a canon; each sings the same melody, but the dramatic effect is achieved through the potency of the underlying music: "S'appressan gl'istanti d'urina fatale" ("The moment of direst wrath is fast approaching.")

With authoritarian resolve and determination, Nabucco condemns and humiliates the Babylonian and Hebrew gods, arrogantly declaring himself both king and god: "Ascoltate

I detti miei v'è un sol Nume il vostro Re!" ("Listen to my words. There is one god: your king!") And then he commands all to kneel before him: "Giu! Prostrati! Non son più re, son Dio!" ("All kneel! I am no longer king, but god!") But suddenly there is a crash of thunder and Nabucco's crown is lifted by an inexplicable supernatural force; Nabucco falls powerless to the ground.

In the original play, Nabuchodonosor (Nabucco) was consumed by two passions: the execution of the Exiles, and crushing the conspiracy of Abigail and the Priests of Baal. After he revealed to Abigail that she was the child of a slave, he insisted that she publicly renounce her claim to the throne. But the Priests of Baal inform the king that they refuse to serve under Fenena's regency because she has converted to the worship of Jehovah. After Nabuchodonosor unveils a graven image of himself in the Hanging Gardens, the Priests of Baal and the Exile prophet Zacharias condemn his blasphemy. Nabuchodonosor orders that Zacharias be brought before the image and killed. Fenena attempts to come to his aid by declaring, "I am a Jew," to which Nabuchodonosor replies, "And I am god." Zacharias stretches out his hand and there is a crash of thunder: Nabuchodonosor's crown falls and he sinks to the ground in a faint. In his garment, Abigail finds the parchment disproving her royal birth.

In the opera story, after Nabucco is struck by the thunderbolt, a mad scene follows, the music comprised of alternating tempos that suggest Nabucco's incoherence and disorientation. Pathetically, Nabucco pleads for Fenena's help: "Ah! Perché perchè sul ciglio una lagrima" ("Why did a tear start from my eye"), continuing his plea to his daughter, "Oh! Mia figlia! E tu, e tu pur anco non soccorri al debil fianco?" ("My daughter! Why do you not come to help me?")

Zaccaria prophetically comments on Nabucco's arrogance and insolence: "Il ciel ha punito il vanitor!" ("Heaven has punished the bragger!") But Abigaille seizes Nabucco's crown and proclaims in triumph, : "Ma del popolo di Belo non fia spento lo splendor!" ("For Baal's people, the glory has not ended!")

In Part III - Scene 1, Verdi provided a preview of the dramatic baritone-soprano duets that he would master in his later operas; it is a magnificent duet between Nabucco and Abigaille, a duel between Abigaille's unbridled passions of revenge, and Nabucco's despair at his disgrace and humiliation: Nabucco is now a prisoner in his own palace, helpless against Abigaille's recriminations: "Ah! Miserando doveglio!" ("Woe and misery!") He is a fallen man, humbled to despair, and begs Abigaille's forgiveness and the return of his daughter: "Deh perdona, deh perdona, ad un padre che delira" ("Forgive, forgive, a delirious father."), the duet, a blueprint for the father-daughter duets that Verdi perfected just nine years later in *Rigoletto*.

In Part IV, Scene 1, Nabucco is disoriented and estranged from reality: he is haunted by nightmarish memories of the events that contributed to his horrible fall from power; he recalls in terror that he was struck down by a supernatural force, and he is overcome with guilt and remorse as he envisions the Hebrew Exiles pleading for mercy. The sound of trumpets signifying the marching Assyrians leading his daughter Fenena to her execution awakens him to full consciousness. But he becomes horrified by the realization of his impotency, and that he is a prisoner in his own palace: “Ah ! prigioniero io sono!” (“Ah! I am a prisoner!”)

Nabucco is a broken man, but he senses that there may be but one hope; he falls to his knees and prays to the Hebrew God Jehovah to forgive him for his sin of pride, and that He spare his daughter’s life: “Dio di Giuda! L’ara il tempio” (“God of the Hebrews, the altar, the temple”), Nabucco’s supplication underscored by an obbligato solo cello and a solo flute that convey a mood of exalted spiritualism. Nabucco is redeemed through his contrition and penitence; with his sanity restored, he promises to worship Jehovah forever. With defiance and resolution, he vows to save Fenena. Nabucco and his soldiers express their exultation in the propelling cabaletta that concludes Part IV: “Cadran, cadranno I perfidi” (“The betrayers shall fall.”)

In the original French play, Abigail, Nabuchodonosor’s adopted daughter, is initially portrayed as a daring heroine: at the outset, she disguises herself to rescue her sister Fenena after she was captured by the Hebrews. And later, she saves Ismaele’s life just as he is about to be struck down by an Assyrian soldier. In the opera, Abigaille’s daredevil exploits are limited to her first appearance in Part I, brandishing a sword at the head of disguised soldiers as she captures the Temple.

In Abigaille, Verdi created an adventurous vocal character, a voice scored with extreme dramatic power in the lower and upper registers. Vocally, Abigaille is the predecessor to Lady Macbeth, a dramatic soprano who would mount Verdi’s opera stage five years after *Nabucco*. Both vocally and dramatically, Abigaille is not a role for the average soprano.

In Part I, Abigaille becomes shocked when she sees Fenena in the arms of Ismaele, the man she also loves. Abigaille begins a fearsome and scornful trio, “Prode guerrier?” (“Brave warrior, do you know of any other power than love?”): the emotions of a jealous and spurned woman, vengeful toward the man for whom she was prepared to sacrifice her kingdom. The trio bears many similarities to the Act I Amneris-Aida-Radames trio that Verdi composed for *Aida* thirty years after *Nabucco*. At first, Abigaille taunts and curses Fenena and Ismaele, expressing outrage, bitterness, and her obsession for revenge. But she suddenly interrupts her rage with reminiscences of her love for Ismaele: “Io t’amava,” (“I loved you.”) Abigaille then launches a

full-scale double aria in the bel canto tradition, complete with sinuous lines, an energetic cadenza, and vocal flourishes and ornamentation: “Achi’io dischiuso un Giorno ebbi alla gioia il core” (“I too once opened my heart to happiness.”)

In Part II - Scene 1, Verdi provided a powerful and vivid portrait of Abigaille, now the villainess of the opera story. Abigaille has frantically searched for a document, and then explodes in triumph when she discovers the “fatal scritto,” the proof that she is not Nabucco’s daughter, and the obvious realization that Fenena is next in line for the throne.

In the original French play, in a scene in the Hanging Gardens, Nabucco revealed a document to Abigail that proved that she was the daughter of a slave and one of his adulterous wives. Nabucco executed both, rearing Abigaille as his own daughter, presumably to console his conscience. In the play, Abigail seizes the document from Nabucco after he is struck down by a thunderbolt, and then destroys the document. In the opera, Abigaille makes her own discovery of the “fatal scritto,” the documentary proof of her birth. In the opera, the adultery of one of Nabucco’s wives is passed over; Abigaille is tactfully referred to as “the daughter of slaves.”

In Part II, Abigaille’s villainy emerges in full fury: she discovers the “fatal scritto,” agonizes because she has been spurned in love, and learns that Fenena is now regent. The vengeful Abigaille is vulnerable, easily swayed by the intriguing Priests of Baal. They inform her that they have spread the rumor that Nabucco is dead, and that she must seize the throne from Fenena, who has liberated the Exiles. Abigaille explodes into a forceful cabaletta that expresses her rage and fury: “Salgo già del trono aurato lo sgabello insanguinato” (“I now ascend the bloodstained seat of the golden throne”); it will be the victory for Baal and the victory of a slave, the triumph of Abigaille’s determination and resolve.

In Part III - Scene 1, Abigaille confronts Nabucco and they engage in a battle of wits. Nabucco is weak, disheveled, and wanders about pathetically. He sees Abigaille on the throne, and condemns her insolence. It is Abigaille’s moment of revenge; she dismisses the courtiers and prepares to fully humiliate her adoptive father, her music conveying callousness as well as mockery.

Abigaille claims that she is the custodian of the throne; Nabucco condemns her as an imposter, usurping the throne without his orders. Abigaille defends her actions because he was sick. Abigaille now goads Nabucco into signing the warrant for the execution of the Exiles: if he refuses, the Exiles will believe that Jehovah has triumphed and that Nabucco is a coward. Nabucco obediently signs. But his thoughts suddenly turn to Fenena, his own flesh and blood, who, Abigaille cries, shall perish with the rest; with Fenena’s death, the last obstacle to Abigaille’s quest for power will have been removed.

After Nabucco reminds Abigaille of her origins, she produces the “fatal scritto,” her birth certificate, which she

shreds with defiance before his eyes. Nabucco pours out his grief: “O di qual’onta aggravasi questo mio crin canuto!” (“What deep shame afflicts my ageing soul!”) Abigaille responds imperiously, relishing her glory: “Oh dell’ambita gloria giorno tu sei venuto!” (“The day of coveted glory I longed for has arrived!”): the throne is worth more than a lost father. In a reversal of fortunes, the slave has conquered her master.

Trumpets sound, signalling death for the Hebrew Exiles. Nabucco calls for his soldiers, but Abigaille’s soldiers take him into custody. Nabucco makes a final appeal to Abigaille, “Deh perdona, deh perdona ad un padre che delira!” (“Have mercy on a delirious father!”), but Abigaille mocks and taunts his infirmity as he is being led away.

In the final scene, Part IV - Scene 2, it is revealed that Abigaille has taken poison. In fragmented melodic lines, she announces her imminent death: “Su me morente esanime dsicenda il tuo perdono!” (“Death is overcoming me and I ask your forgiveness!”) To many, this is one of the most powerfully dramatic scenes in the opera, the dying Abigaille begging forgiveness, blessing Ismaele and Fenena, and in her contrition, announcing that the great God Jehovah is merciful: the arch-villainess Abigaille dies in a state of grace, the final moments suggesting that she has been redeemed.

The love interest of Fenena and Ismaele is minimized in *Nabucco*. Essentially, the opera lacks those impassioned arias and rapturous duets that would saturate Verdi’s later operas. Certainly, the tenor role is minimal. Their love is explained briefly in Part I just before Abigaille arrives at the Temple with disguised troops. As Fenena and Ismaele briefly converse in a recitative, it is revealed that Ismaele was arrested by the Babylonians when he was the ambassador from Judah; they fell in love when Fenena later facilitated his escape.

In both play and opera, Fenena converts to the worship of Jehovah, an act loosely explained in the text, but most probably inspired by her love for Ismaele. During the trio of Part I, Fenena makes her poignant announcement that she now believes in the God of Israel: “Ah, t’invoco, già ti sento, Dio verace d’Israello” (“I invoke You, the true God of Israel”), a poignant expression of her new faith.

In Part II - Scene 2, Fenena learns that Abigaille has seized the throne and expresses her resolve and determination to unseat Abigaille, a moment for dramatic exposition for the soprano, but far from the potency of Abigaille’s dramatic soprano role.

Nevertheless, Fenena’s role is minimized, and it is mostly focused in the final scene. In the original French play, Fenena had been executed, but was brought back to life by a divine miracle. In retribution, Nabuchodonosor fatally stabbed Abigail. But in the opera, Fenena is en route to her execution; it is at that moment that she delivers a touching prayer as she contemplates her martyrdom and rise to heaven: “O dischiuso è il firmamento!” (“The heavens have opened!”)

In *Nabucco*, Verdi was the conservator of Italian vocal and melodic traditions, not a radical inventor and innovator. But the significance of *Nabucco* is that the opera launched a monumental phase in Verdi's creative development: what had earlier been irrelevant in Italian opera became relevant. Beginning with *Nabucco*, Verdi expressed the intense psychological depth and explosive passions of characters in musical inventions that possessed a profound lyricism: Verdi was not just composing songs for an abstract underlying text, but music intended to be appropriate to each dramatic situation; in his portrayal of the inner souls of his characters he was striving for finite musical characterizations that approached the artistic integrity of Mozart's music, or Shakespeare's prose.

In his characterizations, Verdi's goal was to create an expressiveness and an acute delineation of the human soul that had never before been realized on the opera stage: from *Nabucco* onward, he began to fill his opera stage with bold characters who emphasized spiritual values, intimate humanity, and tender emotions, all characterized with an exceptional lyricism and profound dramatic intensity. And as Verdi's art continued to flourish into new stages of maturity, he would bring more intense human passions to the opera stage: idealized heroines and heroes, ambivalent characters and villains, exciting wicked people with bloodthirsty passions, and tragic souls who were the underdogs of society. And some of these characters were shocking and repulsive figures to his audiences: the ugly, hunchbacked court jester, Rigoletto; the avenging gypsy mother, Azucena in *Il Trovatore*; and the courtesan Violetta Valery in *La Traviata*.

Nabucco provides a panorama of the pulsing life of human beings; it is an opera story about human passions. In his score, Verdi ennobled powerful and intense human emotions and passions: each character faces conflicts of love, power, and the human spirit, those timeless and ageless human passions that characterized the soul of Verdi's works to the very end of his long composing career.

Nabucco's characterizations are sharply contrasted, mostly achieved through their distinctive vocal types: tenor, baritone, bass, and soprano. Verdi brilliantly distinguishes each character through his music, and each character expresses impassioned and intense emotions through the melodic vitality of Verdi's music score: explosions of eminently beautiful lyricism that possess a driving, propulsive quality.

The title character of Nabucco is a force of nature, initially an explosive and unrestrained despot, but an archetypal hero who transforms when he becomes harnessed by supernatural forces as well as his vulnerability to human emotion: Abigaille is a potent dramatic force, a villainess with undaunted resolve and determination; Zaccaria is the omniscient voice of his people, their spiritual link to God; and Ismaele and Fenena are victims of emotion, aspiring to fulfill their love amid a volatile world in which the passions of power rule over affairs of the heart.

The engine that drives Verdi's *Nabucco* is a conscientious fusion of words and music, together with a sense of breathless action; in the context of Italian opera during the first half of the nineteenth century, this profound attempt to realize the text through music was virtually unprecedented.

Verdi thought in terms of music drama from the very beginning of his career, a goal to integrate text and music into an organic unity. Action or counter action — or dramatic pace — was always his priority, a challenge that he attempted to resolve by striving for smooth dramatic transitions between set-pieces: he would submerge the boundaries of the recitative — that no-man's land between the end of an aria and the beginning of a set-piece — by employing declamatory flourishes that served as introductions to the arias; and at times he treated the recitatives themselves as extensions of arias.

And Verdi continually strove to place intensive musico-dramatic emphasis on words, what he called the “parola scenica,” literally a key word — or words — in a scene, but nevertheless, powerful words that would become explosive with their appropriate musical underscoring; they would add an immediacy to the action, and a shuddering clarity and vividness to the dramatic structure. Verdi would later become a master of inventing music for those declamatory “parola scenica” moments: Amneris’ outbursts to Aida, “Trema vil schiava” (“Tremble vile slave”); Rigoletto’s “Maledizione” (“The curse”); and certainly Otello’s “Sangue, sangue, sangue” (“Blood, blood, blood”)

Verdi’s early operas represent the sum of their various parts: an aggregation of recitatives together with numbers, or set-pieces; arias, duets, and ensembles. In solo passages, Verdi generally added drama to the musical line by intensifying its supporting instrumentation as it approached its final cadence. Nevertheless, like his bel canto predecessors, most arias and duets would be lightly accompanied, providing the singer with a magnificent platform to emphasize the vocal line. In duets, particularly those between soprano and baritone, an extremely wide range of expression is achieved through the inherent contrast of the voice types. And Verdi’s large ensembles (concertati), usually a succession of contrasting musical ideas based on a single rhythmic impulse, are extremely cohesive, at times seemingly impregnable.

Nevertheless, Verdi was composing within the structures of Italian opera traditions and conventions, subtly transforming them, but not overturning them: he was continually improving his mastery of the traditional components of Italian opera — aria, cabaletta, stretta — until he attained his true individuality rather than an artless plagiarizing of his predecessor’s techniques; and each succeeding opera demonstrated a musical advance, as well as a finer musical dramatic expression. But he never attempted to employ leitmotifs like Wagner, or even attempt to develop them into symphonic grandeur.

Nabucco is the first of Verdi's supreme lyrical masterpieces, a work that during its time was without parallel in the Italian opera genre. It is saturated with masterful melodic inventions, and lush and vividly beautiful music that are fused with powerful dramatic passion and power. The opera possesses an unprecedented energy and vitality, a pace that is almost like a magnificent thoroughbred breaking from the gate and charging to the finish line. *Nabucco's* score unveiled the magnificent lyrical splendor that Verdi was capable of inventing: a preview of the sounds and furies of towering passions that were yet to become engraved in the opera canon.

However, *Nabucco* became Verdi's declaration that Italian opera and its focus on melody and voice remained supreme: the opera is saturated with opulent musical color, gorgeous orchestral instrumentation, and melodic splendor and beauty in every musical measure. In that sense, *Nabucco* represented the beginning of a new thrust and spirit in nineteenth-century Italian opera: a rejuvenation and revolution of the Italian opera genre.

The *Nabucco* score echoes many of the styles and traditions of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini, but it truly contains Verdi's own musical signature: broad yet simple melodies that are combined with energetic, supercharged emotions, and a dynamic yet judicious pacing of the dramatic elements that speed swiftly from climax to climax. But Verdi raised the artistic stature of Italian opera to new heights undreamed of by Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti; Verdi added an emotional intensity to Bellini's grace and Donizetti's flair and enthusiasm. As such, *Nabucco* revealed the extraordinary powers that Verdi had within his musical arsenal, but in this opera, they are revealed with renewed purpose. *Nabucco* is an opera that in terms of the realization of the text through music, transcended the best works of Verdi's predecessors: Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini.

Verdi's style eloquently progressed and matured to grander levels, and he eventually left the *Nabucco* style far behind him. His operas became more organically unified in terms of their musical and dramatic integration, rather than an aggregations of songs and numbers set to dance-style accompaniments, a maturity and indelible style certainly expressed in his last four operas: *Don Carlo*, *Aida*, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Nevertheless, *Nabucco* remains a jewel in his operatic crown, a greatness he achieved by reverently and piously following the great Italian traditions in which the voice, song, and melody remained the supreme foundations of the opera.

With *Nabucco's* glorious "Va, pensiero" chorus, the muse of Verdi's early operas became Italian nationalism, and he glorified those operas with a new spirit: a heroic pathos. But even after the Italian Risorgimento of 1861, Verdi's passion for freedom and liberty never left him: the "Freedom" duet of *Don Carlo* (1869) is a sublime moment of noble

idealism, its stimulating and inspiring music the signature motive of the entire opera; it is the music that one leaves the opera house with, the music that one returns home with, the music that remains with the listener and never seems to leave the mind.

With the exception of the “Va, pensiero,” *Nabucco*’s score is not saturated with unforgettable musical gems, like those later pieces that seem to become brighter over time: the compelling arias in such operas as *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*; musical inventions that represent a magnificent legacy that has become imbedded in the mind just as familiar sentences from literature become catch-phrases and proverbs.

Since *Nabucco*, Verdi himself has composed certainly more intelligible and cohesive opera dramas. But Verdi would rival himself, his next 25 operas would each represent a stepping stone in the great Italian master’s reconciliation with the evolution of the operatic art form: the Italian “music of the future.”

In *Nabucco*, Verdi represented a new voice, a new style with fresh melodies, rhythmic energy, skillfully composed ensembles, and vivid and profound characters, particularly Nabucco and Abigaille, who are continually immersed in conflicts of betrayal, unrequited love, insanity, suicide, and even divine intervention.

Nabucco was truly Verdi’s first great masterpiece, an opera whose glory emanates from the sum of its dynamic individual parts. With *Nabucco*, a new personality had emerged to rejuvenate Italian opera, and that new musical language was saturated with freshness and vitality. Indeed, with *Nabucco*, a new star was born, a composer who would lead Italian opera for the next half century as it progressed toward music drama.