

# Verdi: the music of revolt

Issue section:

[Feature](#)

Issue:

[October 2013](#)

(384)

By

[Sabby Sagall](#)

Verdi was a composer who was quite conscious of the links between music, society and politics. Born into a family of rural innkeepers, he was proud of his humble origins. When King Vittorio Emanuele wanted to ennoble him, he replied, "I am a peasant." He wanted his music to speak to the masses, not to a privileged elite.

In the wake of the Napoleonic wars Italy was divided into a patchwork of kingdoms and duchies. Verdi was a fervent radical nationalist, and in the course of a 50-year career, gave musical expression to Italian nationalist aspirations. Indeed, he was widely perceived as a figurehead for the unification movement (the Risorgimento) and became a member of the first national parliament in 1861.

Verdi was also staunchly anti-clerical and republican, though he compromised by agreeing with those who argued that the best prospect for unification lay in accepting Vittorio Emanuele, the liberal king of Piedmont, as the monarch of a united Italy.

Musically, Verdi was part of the romantic movement. Romanticism expressed the desolation of the generation caught up in the new industrial capitalism, with its ceaseless change, its individualism, anonymity and materialism. The individual had been torn from extended family and traditional village life. Atomised by the new, intensifying division of labour, they faced the industrial juggernaut alone, their personal, social and economic life fragmented.

Romanticism thus sprang from the longing for a new social unity to overcome the isolation of the individual lost in the unfamiliar cold and inhospitable world of powerful market forces.

It was, in part, backward-looking, idealising the community of medieval feudalism with its imagined harmony and security, before capitalism dislocated traditional, collective social relations.

The German romantics were disgusted by the figure of the bourgeois capitalist and the new society he was creating. But they couldn't yet see in an embryonic working class any alternative.

Lacking hope for a better future, they harked back to the pre-capitalist past. This urge to recreate the old community also led to a growing preoccupation with the culture of "the people". Folk art was glorified as emanating from the "womb of the nation".

### **Nationalist movements**

Prior to the 19th century, the greater the composer, the less tied they were to national musical traditions. However, the 19th century saw every European capitalist class attempt to create independent nation-states and national markets, a trend which in turn sparked off movements for unification and the liberation of oppressed nations. Against that background, the interest in folk music arose and developed.

Moreover, romanticism witnessed the rise of national schools of music which inspired the various nationalist movements. So we see clear affinities between Chopin and Polish nationalism, Wagner and German nationalism and Verdi and Italian nationalism. But Verdi is also heir to the Italian musical tradition.

Moreover, in opposition to the 18th and early 19th century classical convention, the emphasis was now on the expressive content of music at the expense of traditional form with the composer now giving free rein to ideas, feelings or fantasies.

As a romantic, Verdi's operas reveal a rich emotionalism and a complexity of vocal and instrumental writing.

In the years leading up to the revolutions of 1848, opera in Italy became a focus of dissent and opera houses were flashpoints for political unrest. In Verdi's early phase, the late 1830s and 1840s, many of his operas can be interpreted as allegories for the Italian struggle against the Austrians and other foreign oppressors.

Of these early works, the most famous is Nabucco (1842) about the captivity of the Jews in Babylon. Its chorus of the Hebrew slaves "Va Pensiero" became virtually the anthem of the national movement.

Buoyed by the enormous success of Nabucco, Verdi wrote 13 operas in eight years, several of which profoundly stirred popular nationalist consciousness. In 1847 a near riot was sparked off by a performance of *I Lombardi*.

The year 1848 witnessed a massive revolutionary wave sweeping across Europe. Verdi was in Paris when the revolution broke out in Milan and he hurried home on receiving the news. The Battle of Legnano, his most openly patriotic opera, opened in Rome in January 1849 after the pope had been expelled with a Roman republic about to be proclaimed. But in Italy, as elsewhere, the national uprisings were defeated, throwing Verdi into despair.

In his early period Verdi's operas were openly political, directly expressing the Italian struggle for national independence. After the defeat of the 1848 revolutions his operas became less overtly political, expressing themes of personal conflict and private passion.

However, although Verdi retreated from direct political expression to compose operas whose themes and contexts were more private, the three great operas of his early middle period - *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata* (both 1853) - retained broad political settings, with important public issues remaining at their heart.

These three are famous for arias and choruses gloriously rich in drama and melody. *Rigoletto* reveals Verdi's maturity, being a masterpiece of powerful characterisation and unforgettable music. It also contains a strong element of class hatred, pitting the tragic jester against the hedonistic duke who has seduced his daughter.

In *Il Trovatore*, Verdi appears to be drawing a parallel between 15th century Spain and Italy prior to national unification. Both societies displayed problems created by the slow decay of feudalism and the late development of a modern, centralised society. Under such conditions there is oppression by arbitrary feudal powers, including the church, with disputes resolved by blood feuds rather than legal means and society in a permanent state of chaos. A sub-theme is the scapegoating of Roma people.

*La Traviata*, usually regarded as Verdi's most sentimental opera, is, in fact, a forceful indictment of bourgeois hypocrisy. Violetta, a courtesan, seeks respectability through marriage to her lover Alfredo, whose father, however, persuades her to give him up. Violetta emerges, on the one hand, as a victim of conventional morality but also, crucially, as a heroine morally superior to her detractors.

In the 1850s Verdi embarked on a further change of direction. Up to now he had composed operas that were compact, swift moving, but on a small scale. In this new, late middle period his operas were on a larger scale, in keeping with the tradition of "grand opera" which examined historical themes, frequently with a strong political element. Verdi thus returns to political questions but ones which are interwoven with personal conflicts, striking a balance with great conviction.

Italian nationalism was approaching its moment of fruition - the creation of a unified state in 1870-71 with Rome as its capital - and Verdi sought to deal with the new

problems it faced. The six operas of the years 1853-1871 are *Sicilian Vespers* (1855), *Simon Boccanegra* (1857), *A Masked Ball* (1859), *The Force of Destiny* (1862), *Don Carlos* (1867) and *Aida* (1871).

### **Feudal barbarism**

An important issue running through these works is the question of government - and what kind is desirable for modern nation-states. Verdi presents us with a range of possible rulers. *Boccanegra* and *King Gustavus* (*A Masked Ball*) have vision and magnanimity and Verdi was clearly hoping that the future unified Italian kingdom would overcome the vestiges of feudal barbarism and usher in a new era of civilised democracy.

Philip II (*Don Carlos*) and Ramfis, the Egyptian high priest in *Aida*, on the other hand, are harsh rulers whose unforgiving nature results in destruction.

Of these works, *Don Carlos* is perhaps Verdi's classic treatment of the conflict between politics and personal life. In each of the four leading characters there rages a conflict between personal desire and public duty. The revolt of the Netherlands against Spanish rule in the 16th century is seen as the point of departure for the modern struggle for freedom, whether national, religious or individual. The Catholic church was the main enemy of national liberation and liberalism. In *Aida* and *Don Carlos*, Verdi gave the most powerful expression to his hatred of the church.

In Verdi's final phase he expressed his life-long love of Shakespeare. In *Otello* (1886) his great sense of theatre reached a remarkable level of dramatic sophistication. And at the age of nearly 80 Verdi composed his first comic opera with *Falstaff*, which premiered in 1893, a scintillating work brimming with satire and sheer fun.

Verdi was an immensely popular figure. During the struggle for national unification, "Viva Verdi" became a rallying-cry, his name being an acronym of "Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia" (King of Italy). Following his death in 1901, 200,000 attended his funeral.

There has been much discussion in recent times of the relative merits of Verdi and Wagner (by a strange, or perhaps not so strange, historical coincidence, Wagner was also born in 1813). For example, at a recent debate, chaired by Stephen Fry at the Royal Opera House, the audience was invited to vote for one or the other.

However, counterposing the two is wide of the mark. Each made an enormous contribution to our modern musical culture, to our understanding of the world we live in, to the enrichment of our lives, inspiring us to deepen our struggle for human emancipation.