

VERDI
IN AMERICA

Oberto through Rigoletto

GEORGE W. MARTIN

Verdi in America

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Giuseppe Verdi, b. 10 Oct. 1813, d. 27 Jan. 1901.
From a drawing by Everett Raymond Kinstler, 1963.

Verdi in America

“Oberto” through “Rigoletto”

George W. Martin

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Per quanta poca esperienza io mi possa avere, vado nonostante in teatro tutto l'anno, e stò attento moltissimo.

[However little experience I may have, I do go to the theater all year long, and I pay a great deal of attention.]

—Verdi, November 15, 1843, to Guglielmo Brenna,
secretary of Venice's Teatro la Fenice,
who was fussing over the structure of *Ermani*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The introduction deals with the substance of the book; this preface, with its structure along with some technical details and acknowledgments that need stating.

The book's purpose is threefold. First, to describe the differing receptions in the United States of the first seventeen of Verdi's operas, *Oberto* through *Rigoletto*. Ten of these achieved their U.S. premieres promptly, 1847–60, but only one, *Ernani*, had what might be called an easy success. Others, such as *Rigoletto*, won acceptance only slowly; and still others, like *Macbeth*, after disappointing starts, vanished in the mid-nineteenth century but came back strongly in the twentieth. For each I survey how public opinion initially formed and then changed, or did not; and I speculate on the reasons therefore and, with caution, on the likely future of the opera in this country.

The second purpose is related: by recounting how public opinion of many of Verdi's operas altered over time, to show the effect in this country of what is commonly called "the Verdi Renaissance," which began in Germany in the 1920s. That renewed interest in Verdi and, some would say, greater understanding of his works passed slowly from country to country, gained strength in all of them, and in the United States had a stronger impact on the operatic scene of the second half of the twentieth century than sometimes realized. Briefly, the rediscovery of Verdi, particularly of his operas that preceded *Rigoletto*, reached the United States in the 1940s, began to permeate American operatic artists and audiences in the 1950s, and led in the 1960s and subsequent decades to the revivals of many operas long-neglected and to the premieres of seven not previously performed here.

The third and final purpose is, by two transitional chapters (chapters 7 and 12) as well as occasional discussion in the introduction and throughout the text, to provide a context against which critical and audience comment on the operas may be weighed. For as the country grew in population, wealth, and modes of transportation, so, too, did the production of opera in size of orchestra, skill of chorus, ability to tour, and even in audience behavior. Moreover, until about 1890, in all aspects, that growth, though differing from region to region, was remarkably swift, so that in one generation long-lived members saw and heard opera grow from crude beginnings to sophisticated entertainment. And it is against that swiftly changing context that the reception of Verdi's early operas should be considered. This brings us to the book's structure.

First, however, a word about the number of operas Verdi composed, for I refer frequently to the “sixteen” preceding *Rigoletto*. Depending on how many of his revisions one counts as separate operas, they number in all anywhere from twenty-six to thirty-three. In this book, only his revision for Paris of *I Lombardi*, which he titled *Jérusalem*, is treated as a separate work. For it, he worked to a new French libretto, gave the work a new title, revised orchestration, and composed much new music, including a ballet. And though the opera today is seldom staged, in New Orleans in the nineteenth century it was performed some ninety times, not including excerpts on gala occasions and several performances on tour.

A word, too, about the operas’ titles. The full title for *I Lombardi*, mentioned above, is *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, or *The Lombards on the First Crusade*. Cumbersome on tongue and page, it frequently is cut to either *I Lombardi*, or even *Lombardi*; similarly, *I due Foscari*, to *Foscari*; *Un giorno di regno*, to *Un giorno, La battaglia di Legnano*, to *La battaglia*; and others. Except as above, at first mention of an opera with a wordy title, I usually give the title in full; thereafter, in the shortened form.

To return now to the introduction in the United States of Verdi’s sixteen operas preceding *Rigoletto* and on which the impact of the Verdi Renaissance can most easily be seen: they divide into three groups. First, the six that premiered here in the years 1847–50, four of which were introduced (and a fifth partially) by an Italian company on tour from Havana. This company, bringing its own soloists, orchestra, and chorus, set a new standard for Italian opera in the United States and with its production of *Ernani* stirred audiences in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia to heed a new composer, Verdi.

The second group of operas, four having U.S. premieres in 1850–60, arrived in a different fashion, under different conditions, and are introduced by chapter 7, a transitional chapter that tells how the country and context for producing opera had changed. For example, though still often sung by artists imported from Italy or France, the operas now were staged by resident companies based chiefly in New Orleans or New York, which for the most part recruited their orchestras and choruses locally, a long step forward in the country’s musical development. Of the four operas in this second group, *Rigoletto* was by far the most important, but in the United States it had a surprisingly slow start.

In the third and final group are the seven operas not performed here until the latter half of the twentieth century, their introduction being a consequence of the Verdi Renaissance. And they form a group unto themselves, not only because of the late date of their U.S. premieres but also because they were first heard here and judged by ears that knew well Verdi’s later works, a quite different experience from hearing them with no knowledge of *Rigoletto*, *Aida*, *Otello*, or *Falstaff*.

A second transitional chapter (chapter 12) precedes this group of seven, pointing to ways in which the country had grown and methods and types of

opera production again had changed and increased. For example, these seven “unheard operas” were introduced not by our then well-established companies in the largest cities, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, but typically either by smaller “regional” companies based elsewhere, or by small ones within the big cities, or by companies presenting “concert opera,” sung without scenery or costumes. The influence of these smaller groups has been great, perhaps even in the case of one opera, *Stiffelio*, a cause for a production by the Metropolitan. But how long these seven will continue to be heard is not clear. The operatic world is peculiarly subject to the whims of artists and the public, and a day may come when most of Verdi’s operas that preceded *Rigoletto* will sink again into oblivion. But seemingly not all; some such as *Nabucco*, *Macbeth*, and *Luisa Miller* surely have joined the list of those that periodically will reappear.

A word, too, about the period covered. Though for the most part in reporting the reception of any of the seventeen operas, I limit myself to productions staged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I have in a few instances extended that period past the turn of the century in order to round out the twentieth fully. Thus I include some productions conceived in the twentieth century but staged here only later—for example, a Finnish production of *Macbeth* that premiered at Savonlinna in 1993 and came to Philadelphia in 2003. Or sometimes I simply ignore the closing date of 2001 in order to show better the shift in popularity of some opera, and to offer some thoughts on the cause.

Also, I should explain why I end my survey with *Rigoletto* when that opera, in the canonical periods of “early,” “middle,” and “late” typically assigned to composers, usually is ranked as one of the first of Verdi’s “middle period.” My reason is that when considered from the point of view of audience response across the country, the opera falls clearly into a first period of only moderate success. With Verdi’s next, his eighteenth, *Il trovatore*, he had perhaps the greatest popular success in the United States of any operatic composer and certainly the greatest here of his career. Across the country and in every operatic language *Trovatore* was staged continually, surviving every sort of production, even one where a woman, without transposing the vocal line, sang the tenor’s title role. Moreover, weekly or even daily until the early 1920s, in all the country’s cities and towns the local bands pounded out the opera’s “Miserere” and “Anvil Chorus.” Thus Verdi became a household name, and his subsequent operas were received with a different attitude. Hence I limit this book to the operas preceding *Trovatore*, those on which the Verdi Renaissance had the most obvious impact.

As for technical details: Let me first stress that with none of these seventeen operas do I purport to mention every production it has had in the United States. With the least known of them, perhaps *I masnadieri*, I probably have mentioned most if not all of its productions. With the far better-known *Nabucco*, *Ernani*, *Macbeth*, and *Rigoletto*, I have noted or discussed only those productions that I think had influence in their day, or reflected most clearly the current perception of the opera, or deserve mention for having handled

onstage some aspect of the opera particularly well or badly, and hence swayed audience response.

Similarly, when I say that in the United States an opera in a certain span of years had no production, how can I, or the reader, be sure? Proving the negative is nigh impossible, but Works Progress Administration performance chronologies exist for several cities, as do histories, statistics, and databases for several important houses, doctoral theses on a number of regions and companies, together with Loewenberg's *Annals* and Kaufman's *Selected Chronology* as well as the latter's many articles and unpublished notes. In the endnotes and Selected Bibliography, I cite many of these sources, and where not one of them reports a performance of the opera within the period, I think we can assume that at the very least no important production of it took place. For a successful production in one city will stir an attempt in others, if only because the singers in one city will take the opera with them to another.

In choosing among contemporary critics and opinion to quote, I have favored in every era those who not only praise or damn the singers, but comment on the context in which they sang, preferring those who to some extent discuss the style and qualities of the music, the size and balance of the orchestra, the number and skills of the chorus, the size, design, and lighting of the theaters, and the expectations and behavior of the audiences. Above all, I have sought to find opinion that recounts the audience's response to the music; what it liked, did not like, and, what is more speculative, the reasons why.

With regard to each opera's U.S. premiere, I have quoted the reviews at length, not only because of their intrinsic interest but also as a base to measure the later shift in critical opinion. Anyone of course can look up these early reviews in the journals where they first appeared, but readers may find it useful to have excerpts gathered under one cover.

In addition to such reviews, to buttress my account of the audience's response to the music, I have also quoted, where possible, statements by audience members in their diaries, by reports of what they chose to sing at home, of what they might buy in music stores (both in sheet music and, in later years, in recordings), and of what they might hear at opera recitals and band concerts. And sometimes for performances in the second half of the twentieth century I have relied on my own impressions of how an audience responded to the opera's music and staging. To paraphrase Verdi, "I go often to opera, and I pay attention."

About the sequence of chapters on the individual operas: In each of the three groups I have put them in order of their world, not U.S., premieres (though the two often coincide). That order may strike some as awkward, but after experimenting with other ways, I thought it best. What should determine order: the first excerpt sung? the first (roughly) full performance? In concert, onstage? Perhaps *I Lombardi*, Verdi's fourth opera but the first to be staged here, should lead off; or perhaps *Ernani*, his fifth, but the first to have

an excerpt sung here and the first to have a big success, carrying his name from city to city. Amid all the possibilities, one date was certain and recognized everywhere, the opera's world premiere, and I chose to follow that.

Then: What kind of a performance should count as a presentation of the opera? Not always an easy decision. About *I due Foscari*, for example, I state that through December 2008 it has had only a single performance in Philadelphia. Yet a very small, very valiant Philadelphia-based company, Amici Opera, gave two performances of it on October 2 and 8, 2004, in a church auditorium at Collingswood, New Jersey, a Philadelphia suburb, but across the Delaware River. The performance claimed to be "the first time in this area"—but in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, or Collingswood, New Jersey? I have heard and seen a number of Amici Opera performances—it has completed a Verdi cycle—and find them hard to characterize. The company plays mostly in church auditoriums with a small stage, charges admission, and generally draws an audience of twenty or thirty, most of whom seem to be the singers' friends. The voices sound like a mix of professional and amateur, at various levels of training, and hence often out of balance. Costumes, scenery, and lighting are simple and unspecific; the orchestra consists of a single (well-played) piano; cuts are many, and often large; choristers number one or two, sometimes adding principals; and the infrequent ballet corps is often a single person who steps about with gestures through a prelude, overture, or some introductory chorus left unsung. Does such a production qualify as a staging of the opera?

Comparing it to productions by the Amato Opera in New York, I ruled it did not. The Amato, albeit in a tiny theater (capacity 107), offered a small orchestra, usually a piano and seven or eight instruments, scenery and costumes pertinent to the opera, fewer cuts (often none), better-trained and -balanced voices, and a chorus of ten or more, not employing principals. Moreover, generally playing to a full house, it scheduled each opera for eight or ten performances, far more rehearsed. Pocket Opera in San Francisco is somewhat similar. Other people, of course, might draw the line differently.

And another line of uncertain placement: my distinction between a reduction of a score and an arrangement. Ears hear differently, but to mine, for these early operas at least, an orchestra of about thirty-two is the smallest that can make Verdi sound like himself. Most Italian orchestras of his time, those in the theaters for which he wrote, had orchestras of fifty or more, and in a performance with an orchestra of thirty-two or less, to my ear, the sound begins to be merely a suggestion, an approximation of Verdi. And I call that scoring an arrangement, but count as a reduction one that, though shrinking of the number of instruments, does not lose the composer's characteristic sound. Of course that sound varies from opera to opera. For example, *Aida* can sound pretty much like itself with an orchestra of forty, but *Don Carlos* cannot.

Eight of the book's chapters, those on *Oberto*, *Un giorno di regno*, *Nabucco*, *Lombardi*, *Ernani*, *Foscari*, *Giovanna d'Arco*, and *Alzira*, first appeared in different

guise as articles in the *Opera Quarterly*, published by Oxford University Press. These appeared serially, in the order of Verdi's composing, starting in autumn 2002 and ending in spring 2005. They were also published online by Oxford Press at <http://oq.oxfordjournals.org/>; and I thank the Oxford Press for permission to reprint them as revised. Also, the two transitional chapters (7 and 12), in quite different form and under the titles "Some Overlooked Operatic History," appeared in the *Yale Review*, January and April 2009 issues. All else appears here for the first time.

In discussing the history of individual operas I have not given synopses of the operas, but limited myself to naming characters when needed and to outlining in any detail only those scenes discussed at some length. Synopses of all of Verdi's operas can be found in many books, including *The New Grove Guide to Verdi and His Operas*, as well as *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, and also (often accompanied by a libretto) in recordings, which now exist for all of Verdi's operas. In addition, synopses and librettos for all the operas, and in Italian and English, may be found on the Internet at www.giuseppeverdi.it.

Finally, some acknowledgments. In trying to recreate the context in which Verdi's operas first appeared in the United States, especially the cultural ambience of the country's leading operatic cities, or to clear a confusion, confirm a date, or convert a speculation into fact, I have frequently sought help from today's scholars, archivists, and librarians. The many scholars may be found in the endnotes and bibliography. Among the archivists, those to whom I most frequently turned, were: in New Orleans, Jack Belsom, archivist of the New Orleans Opera Association; in New York, Robert Tuggle and his staff in the Metropolitan Opera Archives; in Philadelphia, Frank Hamilton for his database *Opera in Philadelphia*; and finally, Thomas G. Kaufman for his many chronologies of American opera companies and in particular for his worldwide chronology, *Verdi and His Major Contemporaries*, from which on many occasions he shared his notes with me.

Among the librarians, I particularly wish to thank those at the New York Public Library, in both its music and main divisions; at the New-York Historical Society; and the Boston Athenaeum; also those who by phone, fax, or letter answered my questions put to the Library of Congress, the Boston Public Library, and the collections and museums in New Orleans, San Francisco, and College Park, Maryland. Verily, the writer's best friend is often a librarian!

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DeRenzi, Vincent La Selva, and David Lawton—learned men all, and generous with their time and knowledge.

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George W. Martin
Kennett Square, PA
June 2010

Introduction

Verdi, like Shakespeare in our theater, is now so much a part of opera in the United States that we tend to forget that he was not always with us, not always popular, and that many of those hearing him for the first time in the late 1840s felt assaulted by his music. One outraged New York critic, reviewing the U.S. premiere of *Ernani*, wished to have cut on his tombstone, “HE LIKED NOT VERDI,”¹ and a member of a later audience who kept a diary noted, Verdi “keeps up a ceaseless torrent of forcible-feeble emphasis, passion, and vehemence till one is weary of him as of an author who deals only in italics, large capitals, dashes and interjection marks.”² Yet a critic in Philadelphia remarked, “His sustained style, intensely dramatic situations, grand *finales* and concerted pieces; altogether it was a new experience to us.” And in Boston another recorded that with *Ernani* “all recollections of English opera were effaced by this life-breathing, passionate, and effective performance, and from that hour a new ideal of excellence in operatic affairs became fixed and irrevocable.”³

As the Bostonian implied, opera in the United States in the late 1840s, at least in our eastern seaboard cities, was undergoing a change. English opera, typically songs interspersed with dialogue and played by actors not singers, was slowly giving way to Italian opera, which required more musical skill. Not only were the Italian operas more heavily orchestrated, with larger choruses and more complicated music, arias for songs, sextets for duets, but often their finales continued unbroken by recitative or dialogue for ten minutes or more.

One city, New Orleans, was far ahead in this change. In 1847, the year in which the Italian Opera Company of Havana brought *Ernani* to the United States, New Orleans had the country’s only resident opera company, the only theater devoted primarily to opera, the largest theater orchestra, and even, at times, a small ballet corps; and as early as 1829 had started what was probably the country’s first, fairly regular, newspaper column of opera news, comment, and criticism.⁴ The New Orleans company had toured in six summers, 1827–33, to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, presenting a total of 251 performances of 61 operas by 24 composers, mostly light French works with much spoken dialogue but all accompanied by better soloists, orchestra, and chorus than those usually heard in the northeast.⁵ Yet its impact, though stimulating, ultimately was limited by New Orleans’s isolation, four weeks away by sail, and by its small population, in 1850 barely a tenth of the potential, combined audiences of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Moreover, because of the city’s French cultural heritage, its citizens

generally preferred French to Italian opera, Grétry, Boieldieu, or Meyerbeer to Verdi. In New Orleans in the mid-nineteenth century the most popular of Verdi's early operas was not *Ernani* but *Jérusalem*, an 1847 revision of his *I Lombardi* (1843) that he had scored to a new French libretto and more in the style of Meyerbeer.

Yet the future for opera in the United States lay more in the northeast, particularly in New York, which in 1850 had a population of 696,115, roughly five times more than any of the other four cities (see appendix C). And by the mid-1850s New York would have a large theater devoted primarily to opera, the Academy of Music, and several operatic orchestras as large and expert as those in New Orleans. Verdi's operas, however, began to arrive in New York before this transformation was complete.

As late as the 1840s in the country's northeast, unlike New Orleans, many people were still wary of theaters in general and of Italian opera in particular, not sure they liked it or even approved of it for others. Clerics frequently preached against theaters of any kind;⁶ Timothy Dwight, a former president of Yale College, in 1824 condemned them in his *Essay on the Stage*,⁷ and as late as 1858 a music critic for the *Tribune*, who was himself a composer, William Henry Fry, complained of Mozart: "We presume it would do no good or we might give a homily on the indecency of *Don Giovanni*. . . . How modest American girls can look on in public at the representation of an undisguised scene of seduction, can hear the shrieks of the supposed victim, and see her return to the stage as the conquest of the libertine is a question we leave them and their parents to solve. The whole drift of this drama—the rigamarole of the valet about conquests—is of the same kind of brazen pruriency. The hellfire at the close does not cleanse it a jot."⁸ In these years, on the whole, the Creoles in New Orleans brought more knowledge and attention to the musical side of their operatic performances and behaved better in their theaters than their Anglo-Saxon-Scots-Irish cousins in the northeast.

As stated in the preface, the book's purpose is threefold: to describe the reception in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of each of Verdi's first seventeen operas, *Oberto* through *Rigoletto*, recounting how opinion of them formed and changed; to show how the so-called Verdi Renaissance of the twentieth century gave new life to some of his operas that previously had failed here while leading seven more to their U.S. premieres; and to provide a context against which the operas' receptions may be gauged.

Of Verdi's later operas, ending with *Falstaff* (1893), only *Trovatore* and *Aida* achieved like *Ernani* an instant, continuing success. Even *Rigoletto* at first failed at the box office and in 1866 was debated in court as an example of lurid immorality.⁹ Earlier, in 1861, *Traviata* had been banned briefly in Brooklyn, and an American soprano, Emma Abbott, in the late 1870s refused to sing the leading role because of its immorality (though she later relented).¹⁰ And following *Aida*, Verdi's final operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, were so demanding of

orchestra, chorus, and soloists that for the most part only the larger companies attempted them.

Undoubtedly, the chief reason for the extraordinary rise in popularity during the mid-twentieth century of all of Verdi's operas was the impact of the "Verdi Renaissance" that started in Germany in the mid-1920s, spread slowly through the world, and for the "earlier" operas reached the United States, onstage at least, in a production of *Macbeth* in 1941. And whereas in the nineteenth century audiences here had viewed that opera as a failure, allowing it to disappear altogether, they now judged it to be, despite some flaws, a masterpiece.

This theme of the Verdi Renaissance bears on each opera discussed, for it was directly responsible not only for the return to the standard repertory of *Nabucco*, *Luisa Miller*, and *Macbeth* but also for the startling vogue in the late twentieth century for *Attila*, and for the recovery of a "lost" opera, *Stiffelio*, which may prove viable. Like many a "renaissance," however, there is some argument over when, where, and how the "rebirth" began, who was chiefly responsible for it, and how dark for Verdi were the ages preceding it.¹¹

To start with the latter: For a long period, roughly 1885–1925, he was in eclipse, dismissed by those of supposedly superior taste as a "hurdy-gurdy" composer of little or no musical value, suited best and perhaps only to barrel organs. In the United States that idea was fostered in part by a tremendous influx of German musicians, who soon dominated our burgeoning music schools, orchestras, and newspaper criticism and by their constant chatter persuaded a generation of young artists and operagoers that the only music dramas worthy of serious listening or study were those of Wagner and his followers. In 1913, for example, W. J. Henderson of the *Sun*, then one of New York's leading critics, dismissed *Ballo in maschera* in part because: "Much of the pungent early style of Verdi—the strident climaxes, the brazen instrumental proclamations, the frequently pretentious and semi-martial vocal utterances—remain in this work."¹²

That attitude was not peculiar to the United States. As the English scholar Francis Toye (1883–1964) noted in the preface to his *Verdi, His Life and Works* (1931), in his youth "Lip service might be paid to the merits of *Otello* and *Falstaff*; otherwise there was the same dreary repetition of the nonsense—for it is nonsense—about the 'guitar-like orchestra' in *La Traviata* or *Rigoletto*; *Aida* was 'flashy' or 'empty'; *Il Trovatore* just 'absurd.'" The other operas, especially those preceding *Rigoletto*, were remembered, "if at all, by some isolated numbers associated with famous singers." In his book—unique for its day—he gave a full chapter to each of Verdi's twenty-six operas (with some discussion of revisions), yet felt constrained in his preface to open with some "words of explanation" on why he had bothered to write on Verdi and "above all" at such "length."¹³

Many artists of course have gone out of favor for a time after their death, but the scarcity of Verdi in opera houses around the world during the first

quarter of the twentieth century is remarkable. Even in Italy. For example, at Bologna's Teatro Comunale, between 1895 and 1912 the company staged only one performance each of *Rigoletto*, *Traviata*, and *Aida*.¹⁴ And the same dearth of Verdi, sparked chiefly by the current love of Wagner, soon appeared in New York, in the Metropolitan's schedules: In the four seasons 1893 through 1896 Verdi had 42 performances of six operas, and Wagner, 53 of six; and in the five seasons, 1903 through 1907, Verdi had 74 of five operas (*Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, *Traviata*, *Ballo*, and *Aida*), and Wagner, 156 of ten (with the leaders, *Tannhäuser*, 27, *Parsifal*, 25, and *Lohengrin*, 23). Smaller touring companies, unable to meet the expense of staging Wagner—larger orchestra, chorus, and stronger-voiced soloists—somewhat redressed the balance, for their audiences still flocked to Verdi, but critical talk and attention focused almost exclusively on Wagner.¹⁵

Occasionally artists or scholars who thought Verdi underrated would try to raise his position. Toscanini in Milan in 1902, against strong opposition, insisted on scheduling a new production of *Trovatore*, offering the opera as a serious drama at a time when many Italians thought it only a hackneyed joke; and he had a startling success.¹⁶ But the next year with a revival of *Luisa Miller*, he failed. Reported the *Mondo artistico*, in an opinion with which many others agreed, "the work which is certainly not one of Verdi's best, bored people." Though Toscanini with his well-conceived, passionate productions proposed a reconsideration of Verdi, he did not carry the Italian musical world with him.¹⁷

In New York Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the general manager at the Metropolitan, 1908–35, had a somewhat similar mixture of success and failure. He and Toscanini, who came to the house with him, together produced a *Ballo in maschera* in 1913 to celebrate the centenary of Verdi's birth. (The year was also the centenary of Wagner's birth, and in celebration the Met put on a new *Ring*, four operas.) Verdi's *Ballo* had not been heard in nine seasons, and W. J. Henderson of the *Sun*, reported: "To make a suitable selection of unfamiliar Verdi works for such a [celebratory] purpose is by no means as easy as it might seem. *Un ballo in maschera*, despite the manifold absurdities of the libretto, which is even more extraordinary than old-fashioned librettos are wont to be, has its claim because there is musical material in it calling for the services of a strong cast." And in a final dismissive sentence: "It is the kind of music, too, which is beloved of people devoted to the elementary things in art."¹⁸ The production lasted only three seasons (ten performances in the house, three on tour), and the opera was not revived until 1940. But a revival of *Ernani* in 1921, though without Toscanini who had left in 1915, did better, lasting four seasons (fifteen performances in the house and four on tour).

Earlier, in 1918 and 1920, Gatti had staged, for the first time at the Metropolitan, *Forza* and *Don Carlos*, not heard in New York since 1880 and 1877. With Rosa Ponselle making her debut as Leonora, he succeeded with *Forza*, which then entered the Metropolitan's repertory, never to drop out for long; but with *Don Carlos*, though he considered it "a magnificent drama" and in

one of its three seasons offered Feodor Chaliapin as King Philip, he failed, at least partially. Most critics harshly dismissed not the performers but Verdi: “the bungling libretto . . . the bubbling bosh of the romantic love episodes . . . this stodgy mess.”¹⁹ And after only eleven performances in the house and three on tour, the opera disappeared until 1950, when in a new production it opened the season and was hailed as a masterpiece.

The man primarily responsible for the Verdi Renaissance, however, was neither a critic, conductor, impresario, nor even a professional singer, but a poet, playwright, and novelist, Franz Werfel. Though associated chiefly with Vienna, and during and after World War II with Hollywood, he was born in Prague in 1890 and grew up there in the Jewish quarter. Attending opera, he soon became famous for singing along with the performers and for his love of Verdi, especially those operas from Verdi’s so-called middle-period, *Rigoletto* to *Don Carlos*. He considered Verdi’s final three, *Aida*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*, rather ponderous and inflated, and because the low opinion generally held of his favorites irritated him greatly, he set out to change opinion.²⁰

A novel is an odd way to start an operatic renaissance, but then *Verdi, A Novel of the Opera* is an unusual work. Werfel imagines Verdi in Venice in 1882 at a time when Wagner is also in the city. Verdi is at the height of his fame in Italy, but has not composed an opera since *Aida* (1871). His inspiration is blocked. He feels oppressed by Wagner, and thinks that perhaps if he met the man, and they talked, the block might shatter. For what happens next, one should read the book, a strange mixture of fact, fiction, and sympathetic imagination that uncovers much about the man and artist. To an astonishing degree it achieves Werfel’s desire to stir interest in Verdi. As one American reviewer remarked (for the book was promptly translated into several languages): “Perhaps a little detail will best characterize the intensity of the impression which Verdi [as portrayed] produced on me. I thought quite spontaneously that I must use every opportunity to hear his music. Werfel never praises this music, never extols it at the expense of Wagner; he only shows Verdi’s character, and the result is that I yearn to hear everything Verdi ever wrote.”²¹

The agreement of most scholars that the Verdi Renaissance began with this novel is quite astonishing,²² but only part of the story, for Werfel did more. Besides giving speeches and publishing articles on Verdi’s artistry, he prepared a German edition of *Forza*, which reportedly had not been heard in Germany since 1878, and this “Werfel edition” was first performed at the Dresden Opera, conducted by Fritz Busch, in March 1926. Thereafter, it went to Vienna, Berlin, Hamburg, Basel, Prague, and to the many smaller German houses, and subsequently, in translation, to Sweden, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Russia, everywhere stimulating a demand for more of Verdi’s operas, not only the four or five best known but also the obscure and unfamiliar. Werfel made new German translations of *Boccanegra* and *Don Carlos*, while others translated *Luisa Miller*, *Macbeth*, and such hitherto forgotten works as

Nabucco, *Foscari*, and *Masnadieri*. By the spring of 1933, when Busch left Dresden, he was offering seasons with ten Verdi operas in the repertory.²³

That surge of interest in German-speaking theaters caught the world's attention. Toye, for instance, in his book on Verdi and his works, gives more weight to it than to the Toscanini revivals of Verdi that he heard in the mid-1920s at La Scala—in 1925, for example, *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, *Traviata*, *Ballo*, and *Falstaff*—though admitting that some of these productions first inspired him to begin his study. But he states unequivocally that it was the number and range of the German performances, reviving some of Verdi's earliest operas and making popular favorites of them that prompted him "to write a long book instead of a comparatively short one."²⁴

Possibly also it was the success in Germany of *Luisa Miller* and *Boccanegra* that encouraged Gatti-Casazza to stage the former for the first time at the Metropolitan, in 1929 with Rosa Ponselle, and the latter for the first time in the United States, in 1931 with Lawrence Tibbett. Again he succeeded with one, *Boccanegra*, which like his previous *Forza* became a Metropolitan staple, expanding Verdi's position in the repertory from five or six operas to seven or eight continually revived, taken on tour, and, after radio broadcasts began in the 1930s, heard across the country.

Meanwhile, in Germany, Hitler and his Nazi party came to power in January 1933, and many of the artists responsible for the Verdi revivals retreated to England, taking their knowledge and experience with them. Among them were the conductor Fritz Busch, the stage designer Caspar Neher, and stage director Carl Ebert. These soon astonished the English musical world and public with a production at Glyndebourne in 1938 and 1939 of one of Verdi's "earlier" operas, *Macbeth*, not heard in England since 1860. And, as described at greater length in this book's chapter on that opera, that production, again conducted by Busch, came to New York and played on Broadway in 1941 and 1942, the first time *Macbeth* had been heard in the United States since 1864.

In the twenty years after World War II, revivals of Verdi's lesser-known operas in the United States slowly accelerated, spurred by the arrival of Rudolf Bing in 1950 to be general manager of the Metropolitan. He had worked with Busch in Germany and England, and also with Neher and Ebert, hence the line back to the German revivals stirred initially by Werfel is direct. At the Metropolitan, Bing reintroduced *Don Carlos* (1950), *Ernani* (1956), and *Luisa Miller* (1967); staged for the first time in the house, *Macbeth* (1958) and *Nabucco* (1960), the latter his only failure; and in a concert performance at a summer festival at Newport, Rhode Island, tested *I vespri Siciliani* (1967), which two seasons after he retired was staged with success in the house in 1973–74. And in the course of these years some of the country's smaller companies began to mount the seven Verdi operas hitherto not heard in the United States.

In searching for reasons to explain the lasting impact of the Verdi Renaissance, some seem clear. After World War I it was, at least in part, a reaction,

not so much against Wagner, for his operas continued to be popular, as against the exclusivity of Wagnerism, the constant assertion by admirers that his was the only way; and after World War II, in part because Hitler and the Nazis had identified themselves so closely to him, a reaction against his music. For most people, however, any bias against the music soon lessened. Perhaps more to the point, the “Renaissance” was also in part a reaction against the complexity of opera orchestration developed by Wagner’s disciples, such as Richard Strauss and Pfitzner; against the cerebralism of the atonality and serialism that Schoenberg and Berg were introducing; and against the sensationalism of some Russian composers such as Prokofiev and Stravinsky. As a critic noted, after Wagner “the orchestra became the protagonist, and responsibility for dramatic continuity and articulation shifted from the stage to the pit.”²⁵ But the more critics and composers threw on the complexities of harmony and thematic development, and the more intricate and intellectual these complexities became, the more did many among artists and audiences, especially the latter, long for greater simplicity, clarity, and melody. And because no contemporary composer of comparable genius was providing it, they turned back to Verdi.²⁶

Tomorrow, interest in Verdi’s operas, perhaps now at flood tide, may ebb, but then again, perhaps not. For his operas, like those of all composers, have been aided greatly by the technological revolution in recordings, starting with long-playing records, passing through compact discs into iPods that can carry more than a thousand hours of music in a player smaller than a pocket handkerchief. In addition, we now have videocassettes and discs that offer us both visual and aural records of actual performances, as well as live performances from the Metropolitan playing simultaneously across the country in movie theaters. With each step, the gain for opera has been immense. Many people can read a Shakespeare play and imagine to a great extent how it will sound and play onstage; but few can do as much with an opera’s orchestral score. Consequently, by the mid-1940s, except for those who heard the Metropolitan company at home or on tour (and increasingly after 1931 by radio), most people knew well only *Aida*, *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, and *Traviata*, with perhaps a slight acquaintance with *Ballo*, *Forza*, or *Otello*.

Today, Verdi’s position in our opera repertory—the hundred or so operas reappearing every fifteen or twenty years—is greatly expanded. Gatti-Casazza, for example, had said of Verdi’s operas, “six are indispensable to the repertory, and half a dozen others are periodically revived.” Twelve in all.²⁷ Conductors and impresarios today might say that ten are indispensable, another ten periodically revived, and a final ten reserved for anniversary years and cycles of the complete works. In the past fifteen years every one of Verdi’s operas has had at least four staged or concert performances in the United States, and all are available in multiple recordings.

Moreover, the public’s interest in Verdi has been backed to an extraordinary extent by critics and scholars. The number of books and articles now published

annually on Verdi would have astonished Toye, or indeed, anyone in his generation. An Institute for Verdi Studies was founded in Parma in 1960 and a similar institute (the American Institute for Verdi Studies) in New York in 1974, and both have published many books and articles as well as making material available for research. In addition, scholars have lent their skills to start publication of a “critical edition” of all of Verdi’s works, beginning in 1983 with a carefully scrubbed orchestral score of *Rigoletto* along with a detailed commentary thereon.²⁸ To date, similar volumes have appeared on *Trovatore*, *Traviata*, on nine of the “earlier” operas, on the *Requiem*, and one, *Inni*, on the cantata *Inno delle nazioni* and the *Inno popolare* (“*Suona la tromba*”).²⁹

As a result of this scholarly interest combined with public support at the box office, Verdi seems to have attained a position in our opera repertory somewhat like Shakespeare in our theater. I leave to others the reasons for Shakespeare’s place, but I will summarize an argument for Verdi’s, limiting myself to what seem to be five of his most important characteristics. First, in comparing him to Donizetti, consider a distinction noted as early as 1859 by the Italian scholar Abramo Basevi in his study of Verdi’s works then known, *Oberto* through *Ballo in maschera*: “Verdi, as the more passionate, strives more often to agitate and excite the audience; whereas Donizetti strives almost always to delight it.”³⁰ This characteristic of Verdi, at least in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, often worked against his reception. Audiences used to Donizetti came to the theater to be entertained, to hear favorite songs well sung, and to socialize. Moreover, the mechanics of the opera house favored Donizetti’s style: the auditorium, with candles, gas, or oil, remained lit throughout the performance. Singers, in order to have their faces seen, marched to the footlights to sing, and to the modern eye, opera performances would seem much like concerts in costume. Verdi, on the other hand, quite against the custom of the day, wanted to stage his *Macbeth* mostly in the dark, wanted to concentrate on the personalities of his protagonists, on their feelings, hopes, and actions, and sought from the audience more attention than often they were prepared to give. Yet time favored Verdi, for with the arrival of electricity, auditoriums could be darkened during performance and the stage more effectively lit, whereupon social chatter declined, attention focused more on the stage, and perhaps even, with the spread of Freudian ideas, audiences became more interested in the varieties of personalities and their relationships. In sum, drama not concert.

Next, there is Verdi’s skill in theatrical pacing. Among those staging or singing his operas one often hears said, however varied the wording: “Verdi plays better onstage than he reads in the score.” And this is especially true of his early operas in which some of the vocal lines and their accompaniments, in shape, harmony, and rhythm, are too commonplace, too predictable, too repetitious. Yet even so, he usually manages to imbue each act, particularly toward its close, with a sense of acceleration, ending typically with a concerted finale that vocally blooms and pulls the audience into sympathy and satisfaction.

Then too, all his operas are about humans—no gods, dragons, rings of fire, or scenes in hell or heaven, no drifting through myth into an unreal world, but each opera anchored in common experience.³¹ With greater or less success he portrays fellow humans confronting harsh dilemmas, trapped in awkward decisions in which they suffer. And for such stories I think there will always be an audience.

Moreover, in Verdi (as in Shakespeare) the men and women are always responsible for their acts and choices. Though fate may be against them, for each there is an area left for choice, and choose they must. Anyone wanting to hear an opera in which society is blamed for all that happens will not hear it in Verdi. In *Traviata*, perhaps the most frequently performed of his operas, Violetta makes her choice and suffers for it—as do the protagonists in *Trovatore*, *Aida*, *Macbeth*, and in all his other operas. That view of our condition—that we may not be able to control our fate but we can control our response to it, noble or unworthy—will, I suspect, always find an audience.

Lastly, there is his gift for melody, comparable in the opera house to Shakespeare's gift for poetry in the theater. Verdi's contemporary, Saverio Mercadante, in Verdi's early years often could do better in orchestration, and sometimes in rhythmic drive, but where he failed to match Verdi was in the ability to sum up a dramatic situation with a simple, piercing melodic phrase, like Aida's cry, "Numi, pietà."

Melody, as scholars have shown, has a power to subsume its text: thus, once its main thrust is set, be it anger, love, or some other emotion, then even though the text becomes nonsense, the melody alone will continue to deliver its intended message. Thus, in *Trovatore* in the tenor's aria "Ah si, ben mio," when Manrico sings of his love for Leonora, because the text got badly jumbled, for 150 years tenors sang nonsense, yet no one seemed to notice, at least no one objected; the message was clear. As one scholar then observed, "It may be the melody, not the word, that speaks."³² Or, a less stark example from the same opera, when the baritone Count sings of his love for Leonora, though non-Italians may not understand all his words, they know he is declaring his love for her, and as the music swells, so, too, do their hearts. Supertitles often reflect this truth by leaving second verses untranslated, even when sung to new words.

Moreover, in the theater, melody creates a sense of community between stage and audience. The process is mysterious, but the effect is undeniable. When joined with words, melody creates character and drama onstage, and in an audience can fuse a thousand individuals into a single, responsive unit. Verdi was not a songwriter, peddling brief emotions within small, confined forms, but a composer, creating love-and-death dramas through music. His stories can be more or less reasonable, his orchestration better or worse, his melodies sometimes coarse and uninspired, but in all his operas, however successful, he conceived his expression in terms of melody, and for that, too, I think he will always have an audience.

Part One

Six Operas and the
Havana Company, 1847–50

Chapter One

Nabucco

Verdi's only Biblical opera, *Nabucodonosor*, but commonly called *Nabucco* and first heard on March 9, 1842, at La Scala, gave that house the greatest success in its history—in the opera's first year, sixty-five performances.¹ And by the close of 1845, at least thirty-two more opera houses in northern and central Italy had staged it, as well as theaters in the principal cities of Austria, Denmark, France, Hanover, Portugal, Prussia, Spain, Turkey, and Wurttemberg. Yet *Nabucco* took almost six years to reach the Western Hemisphere, not arriving until December 4, 1847, when staged in Havana, at the sumptuous Gran Teatro de Tacón.² Earlier that year, the Havana company (mostly Italians) had come on a six-month tour to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia during which they mounted three Verdi operas, *I Lombardi*, *Ernani*, and *I due Foscari*—all composed after *Nabucco*. Of the three, only *Lombardi* had been heard in the United States and only in New York. Thus the Havana company, besides giving *Ernani* and *Foscari* their U.S. premieres, also introduced *Lombardi* to Boston and Philadelphia. But why should those three operas, composed after *Nabucco*, whose success was so notable, have reached the United States before it?

Chance alone, perhaps. But possibly, too, for reasons arising from the opera's special nature as well as the more general difficulties of producing opera in the United States in the 1840s. In Protestant England, for example, where early Victorian custom frowned on Holy Writ put onstage, the opera's story of the Hebrew people taken captive to Babylon was recast into a purely pagan conflict between Assyria and Babylon.³ Such was not custom in the United States, yet in New York at least one critic complained of the Biblical story and a company in San Francisco, as in England, "secularized" the opera.

In 1824 a retired president of Yale College, in *An Essay on the Stage* (1824), had condemned all theater as "an evil so great, contagious, and extended, [it] ought to meet universal opposition," and called for its "extinction."⁴ Even by 1847, though fewer held his view, many still thought theatrical performances of any kind inherently sinful, and in deference to them many cities, especially in the country's northeast, frowned on Biblical subjects put onstage and by law prohibited any theatrical performance on the Sabbath.⁵

Then, too, the leading soprano role of Abigaille, as Verdi composed it, is famously difficult, requiring trills, high notes and low, with runs between, and an energetic delivery alternating with a melting sweetness. But Italian opera in the 1840s had a tradition of changing a soloist's vocal line to suit the singer, and Verdi himself for this reason made changes in the role. More likely the

greater obstacles lay in the opera's choral, instrumental, and scenic demands and the difficulties of meeting them in a new country with small theaters and a limited supply of musicians.⁶

Verdi had composed the opera for La Scala's large stage and auditorium (capacity 2,300), its orchestra of seventy or more, and a chorus probably of equal size, for he reportedly had insisted it be strengthened.⁷ But in the opera's first years in the United States, squeezed onto smaller stages, with an orchestra and chorus of half the size or even less, it suffered. For example, there were many places for the theatrical staging to stumble. In the first act, Nabucco, preceded by a marching band (first heard offstage and then marching into the Temple ahead of him),⁸ was to enter on a horse—for the Hebrews, the ultimate profanation of their Temple. In the second, when Nabucco proclaims himself a god, a thunderbolt is to knock the crown from his head, while in the fourth and final act, in Babylon, to mark the triumph of Jehovah over the Babylonian god Bel, a huge statue of the Idol must shatter. For unaccustomed ears the noise and pace of the spectacle might seem primitive or even barbaric, but when well-rehearsed, the scenes were overwhelming: the Old Testament come to life.

But quite aside from the horse, the bolt, and the Idol, in a small theater with a small chorus, the continual changing of chorister costumes, from Hebrew wigs, cloaks, and weapons to Assyrian, and back again, greatly compound the confusion. And in the orchestra, though Verdi scored six solo cellos to introduce the prophet Zaccaria's prayer, "Vieni, O Levita!" in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, no opera company, visiting or resident, could muster so many. Even in 1996 the Sarasota company, with an orchestra pit then roughly half the size of today's at La Scala, gave the third solo cello line to a viola, and the sixth, to a double bass.⁹

More important than these scenic and orchestral difficulties, however, are those facing the chorus. The opera is Verdi's only one in which the chorus is a protagonist. In *I Lombardi* and *Ermani*, for instance, though the chorus has music that quickly became popular, in neither is it so essential to the action. In *Nabucco* only half the story tells of a fictitious struggle for the Babylonian throne between Nebuchadnezzar and his adopted daughter Abigaille, the child of slaves.¹⁰ The other half, based on verses of the Bible, tells of the historical destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, of the Hebrew people's Babylonian Captivity, of their faith in their God, and of their reward for that faith in their liberation. Only by mutilating the opera can their music be cut or skimmed.

The opera's most famous chorus, the Hebrews' haunting lament, "Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate" (Fly, thought on golden wings), is based on Psalm 137: "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee, O Zion." Though scored for a full chorus of mixed voices, it is essentially an aria for chorus, with most of it sung in unison.¹¹ The curtain rises on the Hebrew

people in place, stationary, and remaining so throughout the scene. Their music, *largo* throughout the chorus, thereafter advances only to *andante più mosso*, with but one change of emotion; thus the scene is almost oratorio—static, easily learned in advance, and requiring little stage rehearsal. Even a chorus made up of local recruits, common in the United States in the 1840s, could sing it.

But the choral numbers for the Hebrews in act I, in the Temple in Jerusalem, are quite different and, for the 1840s, quite unusual. The choral scene that shapes the first third of the act, though starting in vehemence, moves through despair, prayer, panic at news of Nabucco's approach, and then, under the leadership of their prophet Zaccaria, trust in God. Such shifting emotions need some physical response; panic, without movement, is scarcely credible. Moreover, several short scenes for soloists interrupt the chorus and require reaction. So, too, in the last third of the act. For the long choral finale the score's musical and stage directions are *allegro agitatissimo*, the people, in separate small groups, to run onstage *precipitosamente*, singing. They also must respond to soloists, ending in an outburst at Nabucco (who is singing *con gioia feroce*) that starts *presto* and accelerates into a dizzying *più presto*.

Contrast Donizetti's choral numbers for act I of *La favorita* (1840), an opera first heard in the United States in New Orleans, in 1843, and popular across the country for many years thereafter. Donizetti's act I curtain rises on a group of monks who, after singing a simple melody up and down the scale of C major—"May our prayer rise to Heaven"—exit, leaving the stage to soloists. And after a change of scene to a garden, the women's chorus sings of "Golden sunbeams, gentle breezes," and soon leaves the stage to soloists.

Verdi's more dynamic choruses, with their frequent shifts from loud to soft, often within a single bar, and then back with accompanying crashes in the orchestra, to ears accustomed to Donizetti might sound jarring and confusing. And in their call for dramatic action onstage they were quite beyond the skills of most choral singers in the United States in 1848.

In the development of opera in the country, the skills and numbers of the chorus always lagged behind the orchestra, the weaker, less-favored sister. In 1825, when the first Italian troupe of thirteen singers had come to New York and had presented, for the first time in the country, Italian opera sung in Italian, of their number six were chorus, four men and two women. And these, according to the *New York American*, "surpassed everyone's expectation."¹² But when local recruits (perhaps ten or twelve) were added to the chorus, they did little well. One critic complained of the nasal quality in the women's voices,¹³ and another, of their poor costumes. And a third wrote in the *New York Review and Athaeneum Magazine*: "Two or three of them, who contrive, we scarcely know how, to sing their parts in a wrong key, ought to be dismissed, and they should all be taught to walk off the stage, as well as to walk on. They seldom accomplish their retreat without jostling the other performers, and, in

Tancredi, on one occasion half of them marched with unrelenting feet directly across Amenaide's ample train."¹⁴

Thirteen years later in New Orleans, then leading New York in opera production, for the local French company had its own house, permanent orchestra, and chorus, the chorus numbered twenty or so, mostly of French heritage and singing all performances in that language. Yet when an Italian company came on tour from Havana, its chorus of six men and three women outsang the French. And an unsigned review in the local, semiweekly *Le Moqueur, Journal des Flâneurs*, in comparing the two groups, offered a glimpse of the home company's current choral skills:

[The French] sing in unison whereas the Italians sing in parts. To that, we will add that when the Italians sing, they sing boldly, without reserve; then, too, they count themselves actors, and their movements contribute to the vigor of their voices. Whereas our people, perversely, half learn their parts and sing between their teeth, standing with arms crossed, like statues, and instead of working with the scene, amuse themselves by doing little tricks and saying stupid things. Another reason our chorus is so feeble, is that, for economy's sake, we make use of actors in place of singers for the parts.¹⁵

Coming now to 1848 and the premiere production of *Nabucco* in New York, we have a report on the chorus by the conductor Max Maretzek, who arrived in the country after the premiere but conducted some of the company's later performances of the opera. To introduce himself to the chorus he went to their rehearsal hall, which turned out to be one large room in a storehouse shared with the scenery and costume shops:

Some of the male members of the chorus on my arrival were occupied in a game of cards . . . a few of the ladies employed in the chorus, were dividing their attention with an impartiality of the most praiseworthy character between an operation commonly called mending their stockings and the study of the parts, while others . . . were engaged in an earnest conversation with two of the tailor-boys, of which I heard enough, to form an idea that it touched upon the stipulations for a private treaty of commerce, in which the purloined silks and calicoes of Mr. Fry [the company's manager] were most certainly destined to play a very prominent part. Some few of the choral-singers . . . were also engaged in the tailoring department, while a tailoress rejoicing in the euphonious name of Valvasori, enjoyed the distinction of being secured, in addition, for the chorus. . . . Being totally unacquainted with the "go-ahead" style in which theatrical matters were carried on in this country, my eyes expanded upon all around me with a purely involuntary amazement!¹⁶

But even by 1861, long after Maretzek managed to impose some discipline and training on the chorus, one of his leading sopranos, Clara Louise Kellogg,

complained: “The chorus was made up of Italians who never studied their music, merely learned it at rehearsal, and the rehearsals themselves were often farcical.”¹⁷ So it seems fair to doubt that for the *Nabucco* premiere in 1848, the chorus of twenty or so was up to the demands of the opera, a doubt further strengthened by the failure of contemporary reviews to remark on its unusually vigorous choral scenes.

The opera’s U.S. premiere, sung in Italian, was presented at New York City’s Astor Place Opera House (capacity 1,800) by the house company (with Italian soloists) on April 4, 1848. Likely the company hoped to repeat the Havana company’s success the previous year with *Ernani* (see that opera’s chapter). But neither the story nor music of *Nabucco* was much admired. A critic for the weekly *Albion*, whose reports were often fuller than those of the daily papers, wrote:

The house was but thinly attended. . . .

The plot of the Opera is taken from the Bible; how far such a course is permissible we will not now stop to enquire, but we cannot but observe that while there exists so wide a field for Operatic subjects of a secular nature, it would be much better to let the scriptures alone. . . .

The music of this Opera is a facsimile of Verdi’s other operas, *I Lombardi* and *Ernani*. Of the three, however, we like *I Lombardi* the most and *Nabucco* the least. . . .

The overture, as a composition [with six of its seven themes taken from choral numbers], is worthless. It is fury vs. sense, and fury carries everything before it. Verdi loves noise, he revels in a row, and everything is sacrificed for bluster and confusion. We see nothing in this music to admire; it is simply a varying of Donizetti, but by no means an improvement. It wants even the little freshness which Donizetti possessed. Some of the choruses have a kind of quaintness, which is not originality, but fantasy run mad. The solos have not the slightest individuality, they are as like each other as peas from the same pod.

The voicing, both for the soloists and chorus, is outrageous; it is tearing to every voice, and is productive of nothing but consumption.¹⁸

Ten days later the company offered the opera in a concert version at the Broadway Tabernacle (capacity 2,500), built as a Congregational Church and for some therefore a setting less sinful than an opera house. But on second hearing, the *Albion* critic found the music still less appealing: “The programme consisted chiefly of selections from *Nabucco*, which if it was hard to endure on the stage, became positively intolerable in the concert room.” Yet he admired the singers, particularly the Abigaille in her aria at the start of act II.¹⁹

Taking the opera to Boston, the company did not risk a full theatrical performance at the Howard Athenaeum, where it was performing. Rather, on Sunday evening June 4, 1848, at the Melodeon (capacity 1,200), then Boston’s

chief concert hall, it gave *Nabucco* its local premiere billed as “Verdi’s Grand Sacred Drama.” The critic for the *Boston Evening Transcript* reported the drama composed “in a spirited style,” but felt the piece had been given “in a highly acceptable manner”—a phrase perhaps suggesting cuts. Yet he hoped it would be repeated “on the next Sabbath evening,” and it was.²⁰

When the opera next appeared, however, it was heard only in excerpts. To employ the Astor Place company during Holy Week, 1849, its new impresario Max Maretzek gave two sacred concerts in the churchlike Tabernacle. In the next few years Maretzek would establish himself as one of the country’s most adventurous impresarios, mounting and conducting the U.S. premieres of many of the century’s greatest works, including *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, and *Traviata*. But in these Holy Week concerts, on April 5 and 7, he cannot have offered much of *Nabucco*, for he featured as a premiere, a *Miserere* by Donizetti, along with Schubert’s *Ave Maria*, and selections from Rossini’s *Stabat Mater* and *Mosè*.²¹

The opera’s immediate fate was to be shred and parts used in a pastiche, *Judith*, prepared for a touring English soprano, Anna Bishop, whose manager, Robert N. C. Bochsa,²² reorchestrated some eighteen excerpts from six of Verdi’s operas.²³ The *Morning Express* reported, “The splendid spectacle [which had five performances] . . . was most gorgeously set upon the stage; the chorus, costumes, scenery and appointments, including a military band, being each in its way most effective.” The *Musical Times* concluded sourly, “The whole thing is nothing but a solo of two hours length for Madame Anna Bishop, with occasional *obbligato* accompaniments of a bass voice and with *refrains* [*sic*] by the chorus”—which suggests the dynamic choruses had been cut.²⁴

Four years later, Bishop and Bochsa, then in San Francisco, revived *Judith*, and this time, according to local report, the story line hewed closer to the Biblical saga of Judith and Holofernes with music now taken mostly from *Nabucco*—but still with arias from other operas and a ballet inserted. Bochsa called it a “Grand Biblical Spectacle Opera” in six “tableaux,” and it achieved six performances, a long run for San Francisco in 1854.²⁵ Remarkd the *Pioneer Magazine*, “Judith was a mosaic, which would hardly stand before a critical attack. Yet it contained a great deal of most excellent music, and was adapted to the limited power of the company.” Likely, that adjustment to talent was the key to success.²⁶

Bochsa’s *Judith*, however, prepared San Francisco’s audience for a visiting Italian company’s *Nabucco*, which premiered at the Metropolitan Theatre (capacity 2,000) on November 30, 1854. The company had a good baritone for the title role, a soprano adequate for Abigaille, and was able to hire locally as its conductor George Loder, who in New York had conducted much Verdi and knew the style well.²⁷ The *Pioneer Magazine* reported:

Nabucco is similar in character to most of Verdi’s operas, intricate concerted pieces of great artistic skill, and brilliant instrumentation, with a lack of beauty



Figure 1.1. Todd Thomas in the title role of Verdi's *Nabucco*, in the Sarasota Opera's 1995 production. Photograph by Paul Jeremias. Courtesy of the Sarasota Opera Company.

and melody. It was placed upon the stage with great completeness. . . . The choruses were the best part of this opera, and the triumphant march, played by the military band upon the stage, and the funeral march behind the scenes, had a grand effect. The part of Nabucco, presented by [Alessandro] Lanzoni, was, however, the feature of the opera. In the last scene of the second act, when the king loses his throne and his reason—in the *aria* and prayer in the fourth act and in the last scene and finale of the fourth act, he was truly admirable.²⁸

The success was real, for the company repeated the opera twice, which was unusual for a new opera in a city as small as San Francisco (c. 48,000 in 1854).²⁹ Yet at its second and third performances the audiences and critics reportedly

enjoyed it still more, hearing in it musical delights that had previously passed unnoticed, one of them a prayer sung by Nabucco's daughter Fenena as she is led to her execution.³⁰

In 1862, another San Francisco company revived the opera under the title *Nino*, with the story changed, as in England, to a conflict between Babylonians and Assyrians. Again the opera had a success. According to the *Daily Evening Bulletin*:

The music, though occasionally of a noisy character, is often beautiful, and some of it very striking. . . . Among the many fine things that are in the opera may be mentioned the quintet and chorus of the 2nd act, when the impious Nino calls on the people to worship him; the air in the 3rd act where he entreats Abigail to spare the life of Fenena; the grand though simple chorus of the captive Babylonians [originally Hebrews] in the same act; the lament of Fenena when led to martyrdom; and the glorious hymn to Isis (or originally, to the God of Israel) that closes the work. The funeral march in the 4th act, and the short triumphal march on the first appearance of Nino are fine. . . . There is a pleasing introduction, which from its length may almost be called an overture, that contains morsels of the melodies that afterwards occur in the piece.³¹

The opera, as Verdi composed it, ended not with "the glorious hymn" to the God of Israel but with a brief scene for the death of Abigaille, who, repenting of her effort to seize the throne and to kill Fenena, has swallowed poison. More often than not, in the nineteenth century this scene was cut, though Verdi, in his earliest account of the opera's origin, describes the scene as his inspiration, the first text he set to music.³² In a later, better-known account, however, he describes as the inspirational, first scene composed, the chorus of captive Hebrews lamenting by the waters of Babylon.³³ In any case, he gave the death scene an unusual orchestration, suggesting he deemed it special. The dying Abigaille enters supported by two soldiers, and the orchestra, after the unaccompanied hymn to Jehovah, escorts her onstage with an English horn, harp, solo cello, and bass, a distinctive sound that Verdi later colors with more woodwinds, most prominently the flute.

Some critics admire the scene, others think it superfluous.³⁴ Why Verdi, at the opera's third performance at La Scala, should have agreed to drop it is speculative. The singer (many years later his second wife) was in wretched voice, but when at the ninth performance a replacement in good voice entered the cast, the scene remained cut. Possibly others at La Scala suggested to Verdi that the opera ended well enough with the chorus, and he, new to success, did not challenge the advice. A study of librettos from Italian performances, 1842-44, suggests that the scene was included in only six of eighty productions.³⁵

In the United States the ratio was higher. The scene seems to have been omitted in the opera's premiere production (1848) that played in New York

and Boston. But at the opera's second appearance in New York, in May 1860, it probably was included, for it was sung when the reorganized company the next month gave two performances in Boston.³⁶ It also was sung in the opera's premiere in San Francisco (1854), though dropped in the opera's 1862 revival as *Nino*. And in October 1860, when a company in New York performed the opera, the entire last act was cut, a mutilation that drew strong critical protest to the conductor, who pleaded Italian custom.³⁷

In the twentieth century, however, in both Europe and the United States, the death scene almost always was performed. The opera's story, after all, is twofold: the salvation of the Hebrew people (with a model in Rossini's *Mosè*), and the conflict between the warrior princess Abigaille and Nabucco (whose character has precedents in Rossini), original with Verdi and his librettist.³⁸ Today most musicians and stage directors seem to feel the second story, as much as the first, requires its final scene. In Italy, the Verona Arena in its 1981 production (and perhaps in other years) offered a novel solution: it ended with the chorus to Jehovah but played the death scene immediately before it.³⁹

In the nineteenth century, San Francisco was the only U.S. city in which *Nabucco* sustained a success. Aside from its six performances in the guise of *Judith* (1854), it had three in its premiere season as *Nabucco* (1854), three in the spring and two in the late autumn of 1862, followed by three in 1863, two in 1865, and one in 1866—then none until 1961.⁴⁰

One reason for the opera's disappearance may have been the aura of spectacle that clung to it, making it costly to mount. When Max Maretzek, for example, now leading his own New York company, revived it in May 1860 for four performances, the *Herald* reported: "This opera was put on the stage in excellent style, the scenery, costumes and all the appointments, from the Babylonian brass band to the caparisoned steed of Nabucco, being all in complete order. . . . The opera was received with . . . hearty applause." Yet Maretzek, who in these years did not include Verdi in his published list of eleven "good" composers,⁴¹ promptly dropped it from his repertory. Even the immense popularity of the later *Ernani*, *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, *Traviata*, and *Aida* could not keep it afloat. Occasionally its overture was played or an aria sung at a concert, but as the nineteenth century waned, though *Nabucco* survived in Italy, in the United States it became a name to which only a few excerpts attached, chiefly the bass Zaccaria's prayer.⁴²

After World War I, however, as part of the Verdi Renaissance, interest in it outside of Italy began to revive. In Germany, starting in 1928, the opera had many successful productions, in response in part to Franz Werfel's novel about Verdi, his translation of many Verdi letters with a brief life, and his translations of several Verdi operas.⁴³ These in turn moved the English critic Toye to write a biography (1931), which offered an essay on every one of the operas. Such detail, at a time when most English-speaking critics were still trumpeting Wagner and counting Verdi for little, was astonishing. And Toye startled colleagues

further by concluding: "*Nabucco* is probably the most satisfactory of all the early Verdi operas. There are passages more expressive in *Macbeth* and *Luisa Miller*, but as an entity *Nabucco* stands above them both, and not till *Rigoletto* did the composer produce again an opera so satisfactory as an artistic whole."⁴⁴ That judgment jolted readers in England and the United States; for as the introduction to an American reprint of Toye's biography (1946) noted, in the United States even avid operagoers had never seen it staged.⁴⁵

Yet, during World War II, when Tocanini in a radio broadcast from New York, on January 31, 1943, resurrected "Va, pensiero," and then repeated the chorus on May 25, 1944, at a huge Red Cross Concert in Madison Square Garden, thousands of Americans became aware of the opera.⁴⁶ Also, on May 12, 1946, they read reports of Toscanini's concert in La Scala, celebrating the theater's reconstruction after the war. The program presented excerpts from Rossini, Verdi, Puccini, and Boito, with two of the four Verdi selections from *Nabucco*, the overture and "Va, pensiero."⁴⁷ And on December 26, 1946, when La Scala finally started its first postwar season, the opening night opera was *Nabucco*.⁴⁸

In the next decade in Europe the opera constantly reappeared, reaching the United States in a recording of the complete opera taken from Italian radio in 1951.⁴⁹ That was soon followed by many recordings of Verdi's choruses and overtures, almost always including those from *Nabucco*.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, those Americans who followed opera in Europe were intrigued with the Welsh National Opera, which, beginning in 1952, annually included *Nabucco* in its repertory (ultimately, for eleven years). If in Wales, why not in the United States?

Finally, on March 5, 1960, the Symphony Society of San Antonio, Texas, as part of its Sixteenth Grand Opera Festival, gave the opera a single performance. The society mistakenly billed its production as "the third" in the United States, but it was, indeed, the first since the 1860s. Mounted in the city's Municipal Auditorium, where it played to an audience of more than five thousand, the production had a first-rate cast, colorful scenery, the society's symphony orchestra, and a large chorus of amateurs who for months had rehearsed almost every night.⁵¹

The performance drew many people from out of state, including Allen Hughes, usually a *New York Times* critic but now reviewing the production for the *San Antonio Express*. He found it admirable, especially the chorus, whose singing "was reliable and of good tone all the way. It did not have the somewhat strained intensity that routinized, assertive, and worn professional chorus singers generally produce." He liked the scenery, especially "the palace courtyard and the Hanging Gardens," and described the opera as "a big, brilliant, and splashy Biblical pageant backed up by a musical score full of rousing tunes, marches, and resounding choruses." The majority of the audience, he surmised, "would willingly return for a repeat performance if they had the chance."⁵²

The opera's next performance, only seven months later, was in New York, where, on October 24, it opened the Metropolitan's 1960–61 season. Unfortunately, though the cast was good, the production was not. The *Times* critic, Harold C. Schonberg, wrote:

It was a new production of very rare opera. Not only is [*Nabucco*] a newcomer to the Metropolitan but also in all likelihood it has not been seen in this city for a hundred years. . . .

The music may be a little crude in spots, but it is full of ideas. . . . *Nabucco* gives the listener of today a chance to hear some remarkable vocal writing, many brilliant choruses, and a type of melodic intensity that no Italian composer except Verdi brought to his music. . . . Thus the revival proved fascinating. One wishes that the same could be said about the production.

The original four acts were compressed into three. This required some heavy cutting in the last two acts. . . . Not only that, but some scenes were transposed. . . . More disturbing were the sets. This production can be considered low-budget *Nabucco* that is also low in imagination.⁵³

Schonberg was polite. The scenery, designed by a German prominent in his craft, Teo Otto, was dismal. He provided a few columns to the back, and before them risers and platforms that allowed the chorus to watch the conductor, but, as another critic complained, "did little to provide credible surroundings for the action."⁵⁴ Throughout much of the opera, however exciting the music, the chorus stood stock-still. The scenery's colors were predominantly dark reds, purples, brown, black, and from the first night looked dingy. Costumes were no better. From start to finish, the production bored the eye.⁵⁵

It ended, however, with Abigail's death scene—which the stage director spoiled. As the chorus concluded its hymn to Jehovah, between its banked rows the dying Abigail dragged herself onstage, alone, unsupported by soldiers. Singing softly, and with bowed head, against the crowd of the chorus she was hard to locate. Probably many in the audience found her only when the scene was half over, and so it seemed utterly superfluous.

The music, for the most part, went better, though not without troubles. For reasons not altogether clear, neither the Abigail nor the Nabucco were comfortable in their roles. The soprano, Leonie Rysanek, cut the trills, simplified the runs, and fudged the low notes, as many sopranos have done, but sang, as Schonberg wrote, "with vocal intensity, a thrilling top and a good deal of command."⁵⁶ The Nabucco, Cornell MacNeil, had the voice but lacked the presence, especially in the last two acts where perhaps too much of his role had been cut to allow him to develop its stature. Moreover, the conductor, Thomas Schippers, a young American coming to the score for the first time, did not fully command its style. Verdi once advised a rehearsal conductor that the opera's "*tempi* should not be slow. They should all move."⁵⁷ Schippers took the opera at a fast clip, but perhaps too rigidly; the choral numbers did not gather

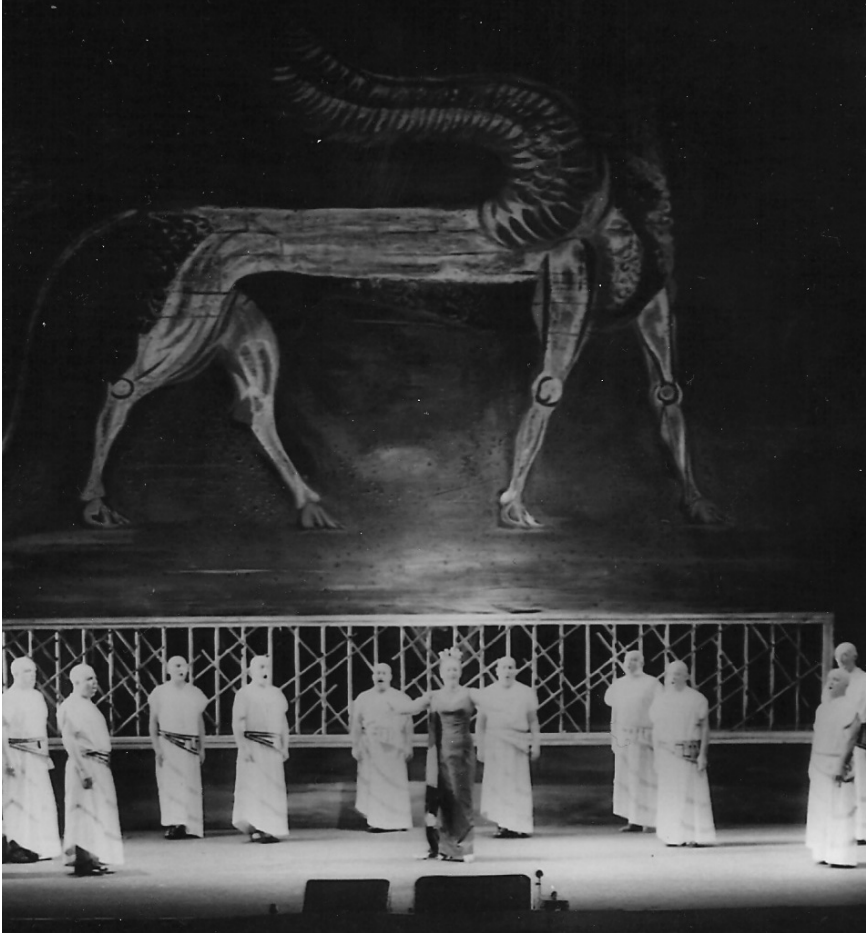


Figure 1.2. Act 2, scene 1, of the Metropolitan Opera's 1960 production of *Nabucco*. With Leonie Rysanek (Abigaille). Photograph by Louis Mélançon. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives.

momentum, swell, and roll. Audience response was tepid, and after the season's nine performances in the house (including a national radio broadcast), and five on tour (Philadelphia, Boston, Atlanta, Bloomington, and Detroit),⁵⁸ the Metropolitan shelved the production, attaching to the opera for many a belief that it was a failure, not worth reviving.

That view was summarized by Paul Henry Lang, critic for the *Herald Tribune*:

The opera is somewhat static and uneven, the libretto atrocious, but *Nabucco* has fine moments and good melodies. Amazingly enough, the

young composer's ensemble technique is remarkably developed; the quartet in the second act is a grand piece. However, while Verdi displays many signs of his future power, his musical ideas have a short breath, reaching a cadence after a few measures, even though some of the tunes have great possibilities. The arias and recitatives are sometimes a little jerky, because they are frequently interrupted by little meaningless coloratura cadenzas that are evidently not part of the melodic design, as they are in Verdi's later operas. There are innumerable holds that slow down everything, the tessitura for the vocal parts is uncomfortably high, and the succession of high notes is often abruptly followed by unmotivated low ones. The characterization is rudimentary—Verdi did not yet know how to create a woman in music—although there are moments when Nabucco himself really comes to life. Nevertheless, *Nabucco* is a significant work, for while Verdi closely observed the operatic conventions of the time, everything, including the Rossinian and Bellinian touches, is imbued with a personal and masculine quality. . . . It is nice to hear *Nabucco* once or twice—it contains clear indications of genius—but I am afraid . . . this opera is not for “foreigners” [non-Italians], at least not as a repertory piece.⁵⁹

Lang's points may be argued, but he states a view of the opera often voiced in the United States in the 1960s. Yet in his conclusion—that the opera could succeed only in Italy—events promptly contradicted him. In the United States interest in *Nabucco* continued to bloom. San Francisco staged an opulent production in 1961, in a style opposed to the Metropolitan's. In San Francisco, wrote one critic, the stage director tumbled “terrified Hebrews from the wings onto the sloping temple floor as the first act battle spilled to the stage.”⁶⁰ Chicago had a production in 1963, the first in the city's 124-year history—only moderately successful, according to one critic, because the company had borrowed the Metropolitan's stylized scenery and costumes.⁶¹ Like the Metropolitan, the Lyric Opera of Chicago dropped the opera, whereas San Francisco, where *Nabucco* always seemed to find success, revived it in 1964, 1970, 1982 (new production), 1987, and 1999. Meanwhile, around the country smaller companies began to stage the opera, so that in the last thirty years of the century *Nabucco* became increasingly familiar.⁶²

In this the opera was aided by a La Scala production brought to the Montreal Exposition in October 1967. Seen by many Americans, including critics and impresarios, this production greatly influenced perceptions of how *Nabucco* should be staged. As Martin Bernheimer, critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, later remarked: “If *Nabucco* is to be revived in the sophisticated 1980s, the production team must make at least one crucial decision. They can pull out the theatrical stops and play the opera—banalities and all!—as a Cecil B. DeMille spectacular; or they can reduce the threat of giddiness by camouflaging the creaky maneuvers with modernistic stylization, simplification or abstraction.”⁶³

Where the Metropolitan, in 1960, had made a weak case for stylization, La Scala, in 1967, made a strong one for the Hollywood spectacular. Of the La Scala production, *Times* critic Schonberg, though often cool to opera, wrote:

La Scala presented Verdi's *Nabucco* last night, and it was the performance that all admirers of the company had been waiting for. This was grand opera, this was La Scala. The sets by Nicola Benois were sumptuous and in wonderfully dizzy disregard for archeological accuracy. As a production it out-Russianed the Russians, what with fire, smoke, great idols riven in half and falling with thunder. The rich-looking costumes looked as though they had come directly from the Victor Book of the Opera, 1912 edition. Great. Best of all, a cast of singers all but advanced en masse upon the footlights and sang. I mean, really sang. . . . Volley after volley of tone rang out. . . . The opera is a masterpiece, but makes only half its impact with timid or inferior singers. It needs this kind of 19th-century production, this kind of uninhibited vocal excitement.⁶⁴

The examples of San Antonio, San Francisco, and La Scala seemingly convinced American opera companies that *Nabucco* was best mounted in a style of "banalities and all." That conclusion, however, ensured that it would continue to be hard to produce, particularly for smaller companies with small stages. A recurring disappointment of productions, even in large houses, was a tendency to ease demands on the chorus by allowing it to stand still, tilting the opera toward oratorio. But no American company tried, as did three in England, to add a contemporary shiver to the opera by imposing on it images of modern Jewish history, including the Holocaust.⁶⁵

Even as the music of *Nabucco* has become more familiar, reviews of it have become less interesting, as critics devote more space to praising or damning the singers than to discussing the work. Moreover, journalists and program writers now tend merely to beat old opinions into clichés: describing the opera as mostly choral—forgetting the half that is Abigaille and Nabucco; reciting the difficulties of the role of Abigaille—forgetting the hundreds of sopranos who have sung it with success (albeit with simplifications here and there);⁶⁶ and chanting that the opera stands or falls on Abigaille—forgetting that Nabucco is the title role and has some notably interesting and varied music. When well sung, as at the San Francisco premiere in 1854, or in Montreal in 1967, *Nabucco* dominates the stage, the first of Verdi's great roles for baritones. But in journalism recycled opinion is often the fate of operas that become familiar, and in the United States *Nabucco* rapidly became still better known.

In March 2001, the Metropolitan returned to the opera for the first time in forty years. The new production, scenery, and staging, was a compromise, not entirely happy. The Temple in Jerusalem was a huge pile of sand-brown stone blocks, fit together as if the ruins of some mighty foundation. With steps and landings among the blocks, soloists or chorus members could move up, down,



Figure 1.3. Set model designed by John Napier for act 1 of the Metropolitan Opera's 2001 production of *Nabucco*. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives.

or to the side, playing scenes at different levels. The palace in Babylon was the pile turned round, now colored bronze or black, and dominated by a throne beneath a statue of Bel. But the color scheme—light for the Hebrews, dark for the Babylonians—was not followed exactly, and in all acts the pile pushed the action forward, which was good, but also cramped it, so that scenes often more resembled a tableau than a flow of movement. The production, however, played the story straight, without topical themes imposed, even as it stunted on the traditional theatrical coups. In performances in the house the thunderbolt knocking the crown from the head of the blaspheming Nabucco was sometimes fumbled, so that the audience saw him take it off. Though Verdi titled the final act “L'idolo infranto” (The Shattered Idol), and directed exactly when the idol was to crumble, onstage there was no idol, no crumbling, no scenic sign of Jehovah's triumph over Bel. On the other hand, though Nabucco entered the Temple in Jerusalem without a marching band or horse, there were visible and alarming flames as the Babylonians torched it, and Abigaille's death scene was well handled. As the chorus finished its hymn in praise of Jehovah, she entered alone, atop the pile of quarried stone, and as a spotlight picked her out, the chorus turned to look up at her, focusing the audience's attention on her even before she began to sing. Throughout the evening the singers and music carried the opera.