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VERDI

NABUCCO
Overture to the Opera



Eulenburg

GUISEPPE VERDI

NABUCCO

Overture to the Opera



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PREFACE

The years that had preceded the composition of Verdi's *Nabucco* were not exactly happy ones. His wife Margherita had died in June 1840 only four years after their wedding. Two years before the couple had to cope with the death of their first-born child Virginia and a year later they also lost their son Icilio Romano. Neither of the two children survived its second year of life. The extremely successful premiere of his *Oberto* at La Scala, Milan, in November 1839 nevertheless gave Verdi a brief moment of happiness and brought in other commissions. However, the opera *Un giorno di regno*, composed the year his wife died, turned out to be a fiasco. It received only a single performance, and Verdi even played with the idea of bidding the stage farewell. Only at the insistence of the impresario Bartolomeo Merelli did the composer change his mind.¹ Merelli handed over to Verdi the libretto to *Nabucodonosor* (Nebuchadnezzar) which he had already unsuccessfully offered to Otto Nicolai for setting. Originally Verdi was to have set to music *Il proscritto* by the librettist Gaetano Rossi. However, after Nicolai had rejected *Nabucco* because of its brutal content, he ultimately took over Rossi's text. The choice, though, did not bring him success. Nicolai's *Il Proscritto* failed with the public and at that point left behind a deep break in a professional as well as also in a private sense. Thus, after requesting an early cancellation of his contract with Merelli, Nicolai turned his back on Italy and also on his relation with the

singer Erminia Frezzolini who – as protagonist of the work was suffering on-stage the full effects of the merciless reaction of the audience – was broken by the desolate performance.²

Verdi, on the other hand, was granted a great triumph with the *Nabucco* scorned by Nicolai; even Erminia Frezzolini – now prima donna in two of Verdi's operas – was able to look forward to a more brilliant heyday in the not too-distant future. And yet Verdi also seems for a moment to have turned away from the piece, if one believes a contemporary report that Verdi himself (in retrospect at least) declared as trustworthy. The text of 'Va pensiero, sull'ali dorate' ('Fly, thought, on golden wings', the 'Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves') is alleged to have gripped Verdi from the first moment and probably contributed to his acceptance of the commission.³ The libretto for *Nabucodonosor* was written by Temistocle Solera who, concerning the central plot lines, could orient himself to the play *Nabuchodonosor* by Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu dating from 1836 as well as to the ballet *Nabuccodonosor* by Antonio Cortesi and premiered in the same year, at La Scala, Milan. Apart from some changes and/or additions Solera's libretto differed from its models in one essential detail: the strong accentuation of the choral scenes ascribing to the people a new quality and, occasionally, the same importance as an individual character. Such a treatment of the chorus

¹ see Fabrizio Della Seta, 'Verdi', in: *MGG^{2P}*, Vol.16 (Kassel, etc., 2006), col. 1440

² see Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*. Vol.1: *From Oberto to Rigoletto* (London, 1973), 92f.

³ see Budden, *ibid.*, 91f.

was, however, not altogether new. The influence of Rossini's *Mosé in Egitto* seems obvious; there also the chorus steps forward in the guise of the Israelite people not only as decorative accessory, but as plot carrier.⁴

After some initial doubts Verdi began work on *Nabucodonosor* in the first half of 1841 and submitted the completed score in the fall of the same year. The premiere, however, took place on 9 March 1842 at La Scala, Milan, which delay was probably not entirely unclouded by previous differences concerning the production design of the opera. Whereupon Merelli gratefully seized the opportunity thus offered to reduce the costs and resorted to the already available costumes and decor of the *Nabuccodonosor* ballet performed four years previously.⁵ All the more gratifying for Verdi, therefore, must have been the brilliant success of the premiere – which not even the rather middling vocal achievement of the prima donna could diminish. Already on the first night, 'Va pensiero' sent the audience into raptures, so much so that the ensemble could not leave the stage without a corresponding encore. In the period following the premiere, the opera underwent some small revisions. Besides the interventions in the extremely demanding part of Abigaille, Verdi even relinquished her death scene and ended the opera with the chorus 'Immenso Jehova' instead.⁶ In a performance in Brussels in 1848, moreover, ballet music written by Verdi (now lost) was supposed to have been heard.

The eight performances during the approaching end of the spring season were followed by a mature record 57 further performances in the fall season at La Scala. The cornerstone for Verdi's career as 'leading Italian opera composer of the young generation'⁷ was laid. In Italy over 40 opera houses programmed *Nabucodonosor*. Only a year after the premiere Donizetti conducted the work in Vienna – the first Verdi opera to be performed in that city. Other productions followed – amongst them Stuttgart and Berlin in 1844 – but always under the rather awkward title *Nabucodonosor*. The work's title was finally shortened to *Nabucco* at a performance in Corfu in 1844; the opera was even renamed *Nino* for a London performance in 1846, in order to obscure the Biblical subject, since the stage representation of biblical characters was regarded as inappropriate.⁸ For Verdi the success of *Nabucco* marked the beginning of his 'galley' years that were indeed determined by hard work, but ultimately also assured his financial independence.⁹

The overture to *Nabucco* draws its musical substance from the work's rich fund of melodies.¹⁰ But the opera is introduced by a passage that, first and foremost, sets an atmospheric mood rather than taking up specific quotations: a chorale-like melody, intoned by three trombones and cimbasso,¹¹ dominates the first bars until a bloodcurdling *ff* entrance of the orchestra (b9) brings it to an abrupt halt.

⁷ see Walter, *ibid.*, 314

⁸ see Budden, *ibid.*, 112

⁹ see Walter, *ibid.*, col. 1440

¹⁰ Budden, *ibid.*, offers a detailed musical analysis of the opera. The overture is treated on pages 96 and 97.

¹¹ Cimbasso, a bass or contrabass valve trombone introduced by Verdi to replace the ophicleide

⁴ see Michael Walter, 'Nabucodonosor', in: *Verdi-Handbuch* (Kassel, Stuttgart, Weimar, 2001), 312

⁵ see Budden, *ibid.*, 93

⁶ see Roger Parker, 'Nabucodonosor', in: *Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters*, Vol.6 (Munich, 1997), 391

A few bars later the chorale again enters unperturbed. The sombre, yet august sounds descriptively mediate the basic mood of the opera, marked by persecution, but likewise by intransigence, that dominates the struggle of the Hebrew people against the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. The chorale is ultimately superseded by a melody that runs through the overture formally, namely the chorus 'Il maledetto non ha fratelli' from Act 2, in which Ismaele, the nephew of the king of Jerusalem, is cursed by the Levites on account of his reckless conduct for the love of Nabucco's daughter. The contempt of the disappointed Hebrews speaks unmistakably out of the short staccato melodic fragments. The choral music soon resumes – from the now inserted heart of *Nabucco*, 'Va pensiero'. The slave chorus

does not occur in its original guise, but in a curiously distorted form (bb53ff). Instead of 4/4 metre chosen for the chorus, it is heard in the overture in a 3/8 metre that causes the familiar rhythmic structure to sway. Likewise, with the second entrance of the famous theme (b88) the combination of oboe and trumpets carrying the melody – which attempts to lend the music a certain pathos but which is, however, contradicted by the jaunty chatter of flutes, clarinets and violins – provides for a moment of surprise. Other views of central scenes follow before the 'Il maledetto' melody releases the listener – probably not without dark foreboding – to the incidents on-stage.

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