

Operaphoria™

VOLUME XVII ISSUE 4

JANUARY 6, 2024

METROPOLITAN OPERA SIMULCAST

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Nabucco, Verdi's Salvation Opera

The details of *Nabucco's* composition are legendary, and like all legends have elements of fable tucked in, some of which were provided later by Verdi himself. As the story goes, the depressed, 28-year-old Verdi—whose wife and two small children had died—suffered failure in his second opera and was determined to abandon his brief opera career; but La Scala's director insisted Verdi read the *Nabucco* libretto before throwing in the towel. And

when he did, his eyes fell upon the page where the Israelites sing “Va, pensiero,” the hymn that gave voice to Italy's cry for independence from Austria, Spain, and the Papacy.

And though it's a wonderful legend, the facts are somewhat less glorious. There is unquestioned truth in Verdi's personal sorrow and plans to abandon opera forever, just as it is also true *Nabucco* was a spectacular La Scala success. It still holds the record for performances in a single season, totaling 65 when it opened in 1842. But much of the patriotic glory that has grown up around *Nabucco* is myth, especially the acrostic V.E.R.D.I., which audiences are reputed to have sung out to defy Austrian authorities in calling for “Vittorio Emanuel Re D'Italia,” who became Italy's first king after unification in 1861.

But there is no doubt that *Nabucco* marked an important step in the march toward unification, and the *Nabucco* plot was tailor made for pre-

unification audiences: the Israelites suffering under a foreign ruler, as were the Italians. The parallels are immediately apparent when the curtain rises on Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, (known in Italian as Nabucco), leading his army against the hopelessly overmatched Israelites. Meanwhile, Nabucco's daughter, Fenena, a captive of the Israelites, has fallen in love with Ismaele, who is also the love object of her evil half-sister, Abigaille, who promises Ismaele that she will save the Israelites if he will return her love, which he refuses. And though High Priest Zaccaria assures the Israelites the Lord will not forsake them, Nabucco has other plans: he orders the destruction of the temple and for the Israelites to be led away into bondage.



George Gagnidze as Nabucco

In the next act, Nabucco has appointed Fenena regent while he is off to other wars. Meanwhile, Abigaille has discovered she is not Nabucco's daughter but rather an adopted slave child. Jealous

(continued...)

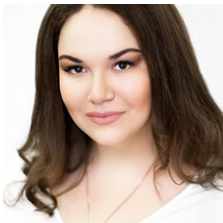
Operaphoria™: A state of ecstasy induced by opera

(continued from front)

of the love Fenena and Ismaele share, she plots vengeance. Resisting Fenena's plans to free the Israelites, the High Priest of Baal offers Abigaille the throne and they dupe Fenena into believing



Liudmyla Monastyrska
is Abigaille



Maria Barakova
sings Fenena

Nabucco is dead. She is then imprisoned by them and Abigaille now proclaims herself ruler. Suddenly Nabucco appears, declaring himself both king and god, for which he is struck down by a thunderbolt. Abigaille now takes full charge. The High Priest urges Abigaille to kill the Israelites. When the deranged Nabucco appears, she deceives him into signing the Israelites' death warrant. When he asks what will happen to Fenena, Abigaille declares she too must die, which leads Nabucco to search for the document proving Abigaille's slave ancestry. This document she already has and tears it up as Nabucco pleads in vain for Fenena's life. At this tense moment the scene shifts to the banks of the Euphrates where the enslaved Israelites turn their thoughts to home and sing, "*Va, pensiero sull'ali dorate*" (Go, my thought, on wings of gold), that all-time opera show stopper.

As the final act opens, the mad Nabucco is watching Fenena and the Israelites being led to their execution. Praying to Israel's God for forgiveness, Nabucco pledges his and his people's conversion. Suddenly his sanity returns and he escapes captivity, calling on his soldiers to restore his throne and save Fenena. And while the condemned Israelites pray to be received into heaven, Nabucco and his forces arrive to stop the genocide. Thwarted, Abigaille poisons herself and dies, but not before confessing

(continued in next column)

her crimes and praying to the God of Israel for forgiveness. Nabucco announces his conversion, frees the Israelites, and tells them to return to home and rebuild their temple, as the curtain falls. – GD

Fact Check

In the opera, Nebuchadnezzar's sanity is restored, he announces his conversion to the God of Israel, and he ends the Babylonian captivity. He sends them back to their homes and encourages them to rebuild their temple. However, given the daily task of deciding what is and is not true in American politics, we decided to research what really happened to Nebuchadnezzar and the exiles from Judea.

A document in the British Museum places Nebuchadnezzar's death in the 43rd year of his reign, which was 562 BCE. After his death the Babylonian empire went into decline, and was finally conquered by the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, in 539 BCE. It was not Nebuchadnezzar, but Cyrus who wrote the decree allowing all exiled Judeans to return to their homeland. Furthermore, it was a practical political decision, having nothing to do with being converted. The return happened slowly, over many years, and many exiles did not return. Those who did return are documented in the book of Ezra. They began construction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem some time between 537 and 521 BCE. – GP

Production

Nabucco, by Verdi

Sat, Jan 6, 2024 12:55 p.m.

Conductor: **Danièle Callegari**

Production: **Elijah Moshinsky**

Nabucco: **George Gagnidze**

Abigaille: **Liudmyla Monastyrska**

Fenena: **Maria Barakova**

Ismaele: **SeokJong Baek**

Zaccaria: **Dmitry Belosselskiy**

Opera and the Bible

We rarely see great operas based on biblical stories, which is surprising, especially when considering the rich source of materials available in the Bible. It could be one of the greatest single sources of the kinds of stories that make great operas – plot twists involving love, sex, violence, betrayals, political intrigue, struggles between good and evil, divine interventions, wars, and more. It is the type of dramatic literature that attracts opera librettists, even though they would qualify for being banned in Florida. So why is it so few operas on biblical subjects have survived in the standard repertoire? It is not for lack of effort. Hundreds of operas on biblical subjects have been written, staged, then never seen again. Furthermore, of the few that have survived, their connection to the original material is tenuous. Consider *Salome*, for example. According to Matthew and Mark, Salome was simply a child abused by her mother and step-father, and it was Oscar Wilde whose florid imagination added her passionate attachment to Jokanaan. Nor does Nabucco accurately portray the biblical story. In the standard repertoire, only Saint-Saëns's *Samson and Delilah* has some resemblance to the biblical record.

These three are the only operas on biblical subjects that are regularly staged. Occasionally we also might see Rossini's *Moses in Egypt*, and even more rarely Massenet's *Herodiade*, another telling of the story of Salome, in which she dies by stabbing herself because she wants to die with the Prophet. Note also that Benjamin Britten had some early success with his church parables (*The Fiery Furnace* and *The Prodigal Son*) but they are rarely performed. However, his children's opera, *Noye's Fludde*, is still staged by music directors at churches. Also, there are fragments of some biblical operas that have survived, even though the whole opera has not. For example, we might never see Carl Nielsen's *Saul and David*, but we

might hear the orchestral prelude to Act 2 at a local symphony concert.

Censorship might have something to do with this phenomenon. It was illegal to depict biblical characters on stage, and librettists were constantly struggling to make their material acceptable. For example, for *Nabucco* to be staged in England they had to change the title of the opera to "Nino" and set the action in some non-biblical period of Babylonian history. Rossini's *Moses in Egypt* was made acceptable by changing the character of Moses to Peter the Hermit, leading the First Crusade. But censorship alone cannot explain the dearth of biblical operas.

Nor is it an issue of how the Bible was written. Devotional guides do not make good operas, but the Bible was not written as a devotional guide. The stories of Judith and Holofernes, or the narrative leading up to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, are gut-wrenching dramas, not sweet homilies about how we should be nice. In the book of Judges, a tough woman, Jael, won a battle the men had failed to win. She had caught the attention of Sisera, the commander of the opposing army, brought him into her tent, put him to sleep with a bowl of warm milk, and then while he was sleeping pounded a tent stake through his head. That sounds sufficiently dramatic.

There is certainly no shortage of excellent religious music, but it is mostly organ, choral, oratorio, or cantatas, rather than opera. If you were a religious person banished to a desert island and could take along only one CD, Bach's *Mass in B Minor* would be in strong contention, but probably not a biblical opera. – GP

Va, pensiero

"O, my homeland, so beautiful and lost.

O memories, so dear and yet so deadly!"

At-Home Prep for *Nabucco*

From their Babylonian captivity, the Israelites express longing for their homeland in the hymn, “*Va, pensiero.*” (“Fly away, my thoughts...”). The Met chorus is so moving that the Met often disregards its “no encore” rule and allows an encore.

On May 12, 2020, the Metropolitan Opera, having been shut down for six weeks because of Covid, sang and broadcast this hymn to the world. Every chorus member, and everyone in the orchestra, all performing individually from their own homes, with Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducting from his home. All longing for their return to their opera home. If you have not yet seen it, do it now. Bring it up on You Tube, “**Met At-Home Gala: *Va, pensiero***” and sing along.



Va, pensiero

This hymn will remind us of the homes and the unity we have lost. We will remember not only Ukraine, but millions of displaced persons around the world, longing for a safe and secure home. And those of us who have secure homes might be more appreciative.

It appears the Met had unity in mind when it cast this production. The original designer, Elijah Moshinsky, was a Russian Jew living in Australia. Today’s conductor, Callegari, is Italian. *Nabucco* is from the former Soviet Georgia; Abigaille and Zaccaria are both Ukrainians; Fenena is Russian; and Ismaele is from South Korea. – GP

2023/2024 Metropolitan Opera Simulcast Schedule

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Carmen, by Bizet

January 27, 2024 12:55 pm

The English director Carrie Cracknell shapes a new production of this passionate opera. The dazzling Aigul Akhmetshina sings *Carmen*, with Piotr Beczala as Don Jose, and Angel Blue as Micaela. Kyle Ketelsen sings the swaggering Escamillo. Conducted by Daniele Rustioni.

La Forza del Destino, by Verdi

March 9, 2024 Note: 12:00 noon.

Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts the Met’s new *Forza* in almost 30 years. Lise Davidsen brings her big voice to Leonora, one of the most spectacular heroine roles in all of opera. Brian Jagde sings Leonora’s forbidden lover Don Alvaro. Judit Kutasi is the fortune teller.

Romeo et Juliette, by Gounod

March 23, 2024 12:55 pm

The Bartlett Sher production of this favorite romantic opera. Yannick Nezet-Séguin conducts a sparkling cast, featuring Nadine Sierra, who won the Met National Council Auditions with Juliette’s aria – “Je veux vivre.” Benjamin Bernheim as Romeo. Will Liverman sings Mercutio, and Samantha Hankey is Stephano.

La Rondine, by Puccini

April 20, 2024 12:55 pm

Madama Butterfly, by Puccini

May 11, 2024 12:55 pm