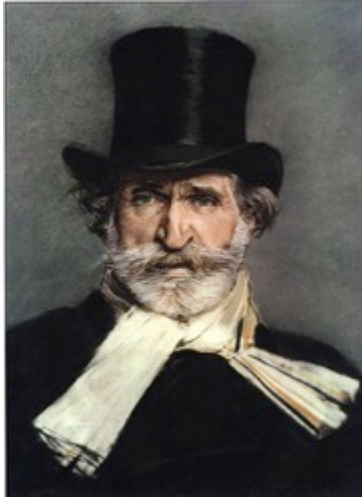


NABUCCO – AN OPERA BY GIUSEPPE VERDI

BY George Plohn

Hebrew Slaves Chorus

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6JN0I7A_mE



Giuseppe Verdi by Boldini

Giuseppe Verdi was born in 1813 near Busseto, in northern Italy, to a provincial family of moderate means, and developed early on a musical education with the help of a local patron. Verdi's gift for music was already apparent by age of 7 when he began his association with the local church, serving in the choir and taking organ lessons. By chance, when he was 13, Verdi was asked to step in as a replacement to play in what became his first public event in his home town; he was an immediate success mostly playing his own music to the surprise of many and receiving

strong local recognition. By age 16 his music teacher declared that he had no more to teach him. He suggested him to move to Milan, where he soon began making connections in the Milanese world of music and the Scala opera house, where he soon became rehearsal director for Rossini's *La Cenerentola*. At age 26 he composed his first opera, *Oberto*. *Nabucco* came to be only the third opera that Verdi composed, out of a total of 36.

He came to dominate the Italian opera scene after the era of Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini, whose works significantly influenced him, becoming one of the pre-eminent opera composers in history.

But he also lived a life with more moments of tragedy than most of us could take. His own home town of Le Roncole flip-flopped between occupations by various foreign armies. After the failure of his second opera, *Un giorno di regno*, towards the end of a brutal 2-year period during which both of his infant children and then his 26-year-old wife died, Verdi vowed never to compose again.

But then, after a chance meeting with the impresario of La Scala, he gave him a copy of a libretto. Verdi took it home, and threw it on the table with an almost violent gesture. ... In falling, the book had opened of itself and without realizing his eyes

clung to the open page and to one special line: '*Va pensiero, sull' ali dorate*' –[in English 'Go, thought, on wings of gold']; it was said that while he attempted to sleep, he was kept awake and instead he read and re-read the libretto three times, but another version stated that he threw the libretto in a corner without looking at it anymore, and for the next five months he carried on with his reading bad novels ... when one day he found himself again with that play in his hands; he read the last scene over again, seated himself almost mechanically at the piano ... and set the scene to music.

Nevertheless, Verdi still refused to compose the music, taking the manuscript back to the impresario the next day. But Merelli would accept no refusal and he immediately stuffed the papers back into Verdi's pocket and, as Verdi noted later "not only threw me out of his office, but slammed the door in my face and locked himself in". Verdi then, *nolens volens* [Latin for like it or not], gradually started to work seriously on the music: "This verse today, tomorrow that, here a note, there a whole phrase, and little by little the opera was written" so that by the autumn of 1841 it was complete; he was then only 28 years old.

Nabucco is the opera which is considered to have permanently established Verdi's reputation as a prime composer. He commented that "this is the opera with which my artistic career really begins. And though I had many difficulties to fight against, it is certain that *Nabucco* was born under a lucky star".

The opera follows the plight of the Israelites as they are assaulted, conquered and subsequently exiled from their homeland by the Babylonian King Nabucco (in English, Nebuchadnezzar II).

Music historians have long perpetuated a powerful myth about **the famous "Va, pensiero" chorus sung in the third act by the Hebrew slaves**. Scholars believe that the audience, responding with nationalistic fervor to the slaves' powerful hymn of longing for their homeland, demanded an encore of the piece. As encores were expressly forbidden by the Austrian authorities ruling northern Italy at the time, to prevent public protests, such a gesture was extremely significant. "Va, pensiero" was indeed **viewed as the national anthem of the Pan-Italian 'United Italy' movement Risorgimento** [Reunification, in Italian].

This famous chorus aria became indeed a sort of an anthem for Italian patriots, who were seeking to unify their country and free it from foreign control and its lines like O

mia patria, sì bella e perduta / "O my country, so beautiful, and lost" did resonate with many Italians all over the peninsula.

Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate;	Go, thought, on wings of gold;
va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli,	go settle upon the slopes and the hills,
ove olezzano tepide e molli	where, soft and mild, the sweet airs
l'aure dolci del suolo natal!	of our native land smell fragrant!

Del Giordano le rive saluta,	Greet the banks of the Jordan
di Sionne le torri atterrate...	and Zion's toppled towers...
O, mia patria, sì bella e perduta!	Oh, my country, so beautiful and lost!
O, membranza, sì cara e fatal!	Oh, remembrance, so dear and so fatal!

Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati,	Golden harp of the prophetic seers,
perché muta dal salice pendi?	why dost thou hang mute upon the willow?
Le memorie nel petto raccendi,	Rekindle our bosom's memories,
ci favella del tempo che fu!	and speak to us of times gone by!

O simile di Sòlima ai fati	Oh you akin to the fate of Jerusalem,
traggi un suono di crudo lamento,	give forth a sound of crude lamentation,
o t'ispiri il Signore un concerto	oh may the Lord inspire you a harmony of voices
che ne infonda al patire virtù.	which may instill virtue to suffering.

And after Giuseppe Verdi, described by the Italian parliament as 'one of the highest expressions of the national genius', died in Milan on January 27th, 1901, aged 87, a solemn procession accompanied his remains from their first, temporary burial ground to a permanent resting place in the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti (the Home for Retired Musicians) he himself had created several years earlier; it was an occasion for communal mourning on the grandest scale. Some 300,000 people (half of the city's population) crammed the streets of Milan as the immense funeral carriage, drawn by six horses, passed in slow procession, followed by a cortège of leading politicians and dignitaries, foreign representatives, and officials from numerous Italian cities. Six carriages bore wreaths and floral tributes. As the procession went on, in what's

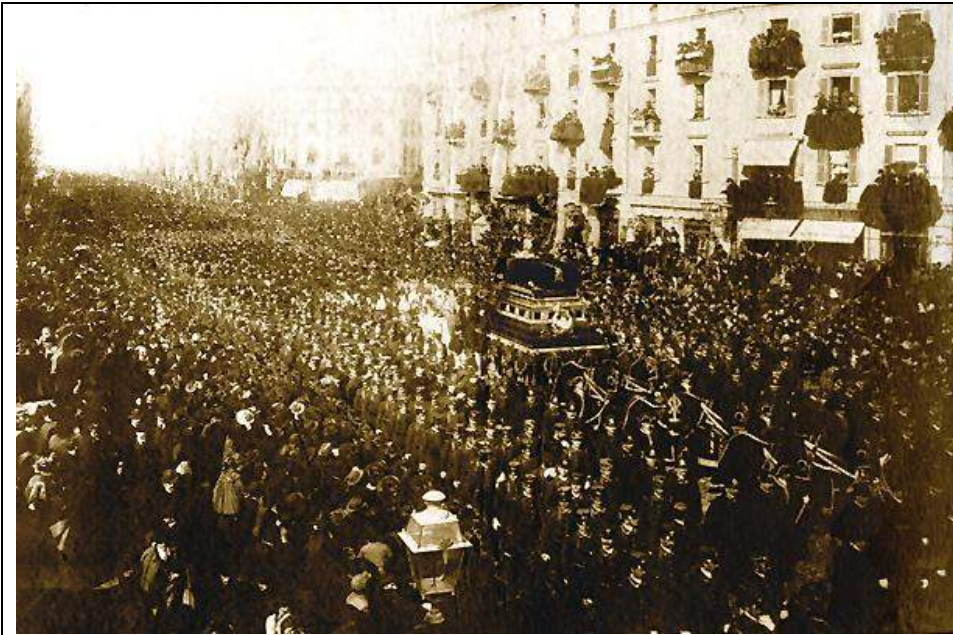
described as a spontaneous welling-up of national sentiment, a chorus 800 strong, conducted by maestro Toscanini, then 34 years old, intoned the chorus "[Va pensiero](#)", the 'Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves' from his opera Nabucco, the lament for a lost homeland that Verdi had written 60 years earlier in his first operatic triumph, accompanied by a huge orchestra and choir composed of musicians from throughout the country. Most of the shops in Milan closed for three days and La Scala and all the theatres closed. This remains the largest public assembly of any event in the history of Italy.

But the reason the Italians took to the streets that wintry day at the dawn of the last century was about much more than just music. Verdi's operas had provided the soundtrack to the politically tempestuous half-century that preceded his death, and this most famous aria had become quasi-anthem for a nation recently unified. When Nabucco had its premiere at La Scala in 1842, 'Italy' was simply a cluster of separate geographically contiguous kingdoms and principalities with little more to unite them than a common language. So when Italians sang the 'Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves' at Verdi's funeral procession, it wasn't just because it was a catchy tune they knew the words to. Its subject – the Israelites giving poignant voice to their longing for the promised land – had become a powerful analogue for the long-frustrated desires of the Italian people. When they cried "Viva Verdi!" during the funeral procession, they were still acutely conscious of the slogan's double meaning and its clandestine resonance for the agitators of the 'Risorgimento', as the cause of Italian nationalism was known. The letters VERDI also spelled out the name of the King of Sardinia who, in 1861, finally took the throne of a unified nation for the first time since the 6th Century – Victor Emmanuele Re D'Italia.

The veneration in which he was held by his countrymen was a tribute to the position he had achieved as a figurehead of Italian national pride as much as to the glory of his music.

Our recording is of April 2001 and it is from the Metropolitan Opera House. In the cast is the baritone Juan Pons in the title role as Nabucco, the formidable bass-baritone Samuel Ramey as Zaccharia, the High Priest of the Hebrews, and the superb Russian soprano Maria Guleghina in the role of Abigail. Our conductor is James Levine.

Duration: 2:15 Due to its length, it is presented separately as Part 1 (75 min) and Part 2 (54 min), on two consecutive Sundays.



The State Ceremony following Verdi's death
on 27th February 1901

Synopsis

Time in history: 587 BC

Place: Jerusalem and Babylon

ACT I: Jerusalem

In the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, the Israelites pray for help against Nabucco (Nebuchadnezzar), King of Babylon, who has attacked them and is vandalizing the city. Zaccaria, their high priest, enters with Nabucco's daughter, Fenena, whom the Hebrews hold hostage. He reassures his people that the Lord will not forsake them. As the Israelites leave, Ismaele, nephew of the king of Jerusalem, is left alone with Fenena. The two had fallen in love during Ismaele's imprisonment in Babylon. Fenena helped him escape and followed him to Jerusalem. Their conversation is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Fenena's half-sister, Abigaille, and a band of disguised

Babylonian soldiers. Abigaille, who is also in love with Ismaele, tells him that she can save his people if he will return her love, but he refuses. The Israelites rush back into the temple in panic. When Nabucco enters with his warriors, the high priest Zaccaria confronts him, threatening to kill Fenena. Ismaele disarms the priest and delivers Fenena to her father. Nabucco orders the destruction of the temple.

ACT II: The Impious One

Nabucco has appointed Fenena regent while he is away at the wars. Abigaille, back in the royal palace in Babylon, has found a document saying that she is not the king's daughter but the child of slaves. Foreseeing a future in which Fenena and Ismaele will rule together over Babylon, she swears vengeance on Nabucco and Fenena. The High Priest of Baal arrives with news that Fenena has freed the Israelite prisoners. As a result of her treason, he offers the throne to Abigaille and proposes to spread the rumor that Nabucco has fallen in battle.

Elsewhere in the palace, Zaccaria, the high priest, prays for inspiration to persuade the Babylonians to give up their false idols. Ismaele enters and the assembled Levites accuse him of treachery, but Zaccaria announces that he has been pardoned for saving a fellow Israelite—the newly converted Fenena. An officer rushes in to warn Fenena that the king is dead and her life is in danger. Before she can escape, the High Priest of Baal arrives with Abigaille and the Babylonians, who proclaim Abigaille ruler. She is about to crown herself when, to the astonishment of all, Nabucco appears. He snatches the crown from her, faces the crowd and declares himself not only their king but their god. For this blasphemy, a thunderbolt strikes him down. Abigaille, triumphant, retrieves the crown for herself.

ACT III: The Prophecy

In the Hanging Gardens, the Babylonians hail Abigaille as their ruler. The High Priest urges her to have all the Israelites killed, but before she can give the order, the disheveled Nabucco wanders in. Abigaille dismisses the crowd and, alone with Nabucco, tricks him into signing the death warrant for the captive Israelites. He asks what will happen to Fenena, and Abigaille replies that she too must die. When Nabucco tries to find in his garments the document proving Abigaille's ancestry, she produces it and tears it to pieces. He pleads in vain for Fenena's life.

On the banks of the Euphrates, the tired Israelites rest from forced labor, their thoughts turning to their homeland. Zaccaria predicts they will overcome captivity and obliterate Babylon with the help of God.

ACT IV: The Broken Idol

From a window in his dwelling, where he has been locked up by Abigaille, Nabucco watches Fenena and the Israelites being led to execution. Desperate, he prays to the God of Israel for forgiveness, pledging to convert himself and his people. His sanity restored, he forces open the door and summons his soldiers to regain the throne and save his daughter.

The Israelites are about to be executed. Fenena prays to be received into heaven when Nabucco rushes in and stops the sacrifice. Abigaille, full of remorse, takes poison and dies, confessing her crimes and praying to the God of Israel to pardon her. Nabucco announces his conversion and frees the Israelites, telling them to return to their native land and rebuild their temple. Israelites and Babylonians are united in praising God.

And so ends this masterpiece of Giuseppe Verdi.