

## Mendelssohn and Verdi: Dreams and Nightmares – March 22 & 23, 2015

### From *Macbeth*

Giuseppe Verdi “*Patria oppressa*”

1813- 1901

### Ballet Music from Act III

During his long career and 30 operas, Giuseppe Verdi composed three based on Shakespeare plays. *Falstaff* and *Otello* were his final masterpieces, composed at the end of his life in cooperation with librettist Arrigo Boito. *Macbeth* came in mid career, nearly a half century earlier (1847) with a librettist less sensitive to converting Shakespeare into opera and when the style of opera was less compatible with the Bard. The two selections here represent the apex and nadir of the transformation process.

*Patria oppressa* occurs at the beginning of Act IV as the Scottish refugees gather on the English border after suffering violent persecution by Macbeth. The scene begins with a long, lugubrious orchestral introduction, after which the refugees mourn their oppressed homeland. Later, Macduff, whose wife and children Macbeth has had murdered, rallies the refugees and soldiers to attack Macbeth’s castle.

As for the ballet music, Verdi employed a women’s chorus of witches, rather than a trio, who cavort around the stage in Act I as they prepare to deliver to Macbeth the first part of their prophecy that he will be king. Then, in 1864, Verdi revised *Macbeth* for Paris, where it was absolutely *de rigueur* to insert a ballet about two thirds of the way through an opera to accommodate the members of the Jockey Club, who were just arriving. With no choice in the matter and very reluctantly, Verdi inserted the ballet as the witches dance around the caldron before hitting up Macbeth with the second and lethal half of the prophecy.

### From *Falstaff* *etesio*” (Nannetta’s aria)

Giuseppe Verdi “*Sul fil d’un soffio*

1813-1901

Arrigo Boito must have been a very persuasive man. After collaborating with Giuseppe Verdi on the opera *Otello*, he succeeded in convincing the old master to pick up his pen again to compose *Falstaff*, which premiered in Milan in 1893, when Verdi was close to 80 years old. Based on Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV* parts I and 2, *Falstaff* is only the second comedy among Verdi’s 28 operas (the first, *Un Giorno di Regno*, was a critical disaster from the composer’s youth.)

In the opera, Nannetta, the daughter of Alice Ford, one of Falstaff’s unsuccessful amorous conquests, resolves to punish the old rake. She, her parents and friends disguise themselves as supernatural creatures, with Nannetta disguised as the Queen of the Fairies. In *Sul fil d’un soffio etesio* she calls the fairies out of their hiding place and orders them to dance. After this seemingly harmless invocation, the “fairies” turn hostile, getting the last laugh on the terrified Falstaff.

### From *Romeo et Juliette*

Charles Gounod “*Je veux vivre*”

1818-1893

Charles Gounod took considerable time to sort out his artistic talents and personal proclivities to emerge finally as one of Paris’s major opera composers. A winner of the Paris Conservatory’s prestigious *Prix de Rome*, which provided the winners with a three-year all-expenses-paid sojourn in Italy to develop their musical creative genius, Gounod got religion instead. He had a brief stint studying for the priesthood, devoting his musical abilities to sacred compositions and rekindling religious music in France.

An introduction to the singer Pauline Viardot and her impresario husband, however, turned his head and launched him into the world of opera – although not always successfully. Among his stillborn creations was an unfinished opera, *Ivan the Terrible*, which got in trouble with the ever-vigilant censors. Not one to waste good musical ideas, Gounod recycled some of *Ivan* into *Faust*, the opera based on Goethe’s epic poem of the same name.

For years he tried to match the success of that opera, but to no avail. By 1870 he began to concentrate on religious music and, following the French debacle in its war with Germany in 1870 and the subsequent revolution in Paris, he fled with his family to England where he greatly influenced the development of English choral music.

The opera *Roméo et Juliette* was staged in Paris in 1867. In the late nineteenth century it was his most frequently performed opera, even surpassing *Faust*. Today, however, it is infrequently heard, its excessive sweetness being out of favor.

In Act I Juliette sings her fiercely independent, “*Je veux vivre*,” in the Capulets’ ballroom in response to her nurse’s praise of Paris, the man her father wishes her to marry. Ironically, just before this conversation, Romeo has caught his first glimpse of her and instantly fallen in love.

**From *Otello*  
*cantando/Ave Maria*”**

Giuseppe Verdi “*Piangea*  
1813-1901

Giuseppe Verdi wanted to retire after the spectacular success of *Aida* in 1871. His publisher, Giulio Ricordi, tried for 10 years to change his mind and finally convinced him to look at a libretto by Arrigo Boito, based on Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Verdi was familiar with Boito, who helped him in revising his *Simon Boccanegra*, and trusted in his abilities as a librettist. Eventually he bit, and *Otello* was finally premiered in Milan in 1887.

Falsely denounced for infidelity by Otello, Desdemona sings to her maid Emilia a sad ballad about a girl dying of a broken heart beneath a willow tree. After Emilia leaves, Desdemona foresees her own death and prays to the Virgin.

**Selections from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Op. 21 & 61  
to Shakespeare’s Play**

Felix Mendelssohn **Incidental music**  
1809-1847

If ever there was a composer who did not fit the romantic picture of the struggling artist fighting for his daily bread and artistic survival, it was Felix Mendelssohn. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth and raised in affluence, his precocious musical talent was recognized and nurtured by his cultured and highly supportive family. His home was a Mecca for the intellectual elite of German. The many family visitors encouraged the prodigy, as well as his musically talented sister Fanny.

By age 15, Mendelssohn had composed a dozen string symphonies, numerous concertos for one or two instruments and a full catalog of chamber and vocal works. Then, at age 16, he amazed the world with two masterpieces. The first was the Octet, Op. 20, which was quickly followed by the Overture to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Op. 21, inspired by the German translation of Shakespeare by August Wilhelm von Schlegel (The Germans thought it better than the original.) The Overture quickly became spectacularly popular and was performed repeatedly throughout northern Europe. Mendelssohn was just 17 years old.

Years later, in a letter to his publisher, Mendelssohn commented that the sequence of ideas in the Overture follows the play quite closely. The Overture opens with a mysterious series of chords for the upper winds, the motto of the forest’s magic, immediately followed by fairy music whispering on the violins, the bray of Bottom with his ass’s head, along with the Clowns’ dance, concluding with the famous Wedding March. Mendelssohn wrote: “At the end, after everything has been satisfactorily concluded, and the principal players have joyfully left the stage, the elves follow them, bless the house and vanish with the dawn. Thus the play ends, and my overture as well.”

In 1842, Frederick William IV, King of Prussia invited Mendelssohn to compose the rest of the incidental music for a Berlin production of *Ein Sommernachtstraum*. By using themes from the overture as a basis for the later sections, as well as recapturing the light and airy style of the earlier orchestration, Mendelssohn was able to stitch the entire score into seamless entity.

In addition to the Overture, Mendelssohn's incidental music consists of 13 major numbers, many of them with newly composed music. Some numbers are musical interludes between acts and scenes, while others accompany the action. There is no music following the Overture until after Act I, in which the still unsorted-out lovers, Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius and Helena, are banished by Duke Theseus. Only in the magic realm of "A wood near Athens," does the composer pick up his pen again. Today's selections include:

1. Scherzo. *Entr'acte* between Acts I and II: Mendelssohn depicts the fairy world, gossamer light, but with hints of mischief from the roguish Puck, "that merry wanderer of the night." Phrases from the Scherzo interrupt Puck's soliloquy
2. Song with chorus: Titania asks for "a roundel and a fairy song" as a musical sedative. In response the fairies sing of "You spotted snake." Mendelssohn's music describes the creature's sinuous movements.
3. Intermezzo: This frantic music depicts Hermia's desperation upon finding her lover Lysander missing. The theme is fractured, divided between the winds and violins. It ends with a depiction of the Mechanicals planning their play for Theseus's wedding.
4. Nocturne. The *entr'acte* between Acts III and IV employs horns and bassoons to describe the magic of the wood and the lovers' enchanted sleep.
5. Wedding March: This signature piece was the *entr'acte* between acts IV and V. The fairies have effectively paired off the lovers, and the play moves towards its resolution, the marriage of Theseus with Hippolyta, Hermia with Lysander, and Demetrius with Helena.
6. Dance of the Clowns: Mendelssohn uses Bottom's theme from the Overture to depict Bottom's ass's head and ungainly braying.
7. Finale: The motto of the wood's magic and a chorus to the music of the fairy music from the Overture opens the Finale as Oberon and Titania enter and direct the elves to bless Theseus's house. At the end Puck muses about "this weak and idle theme, no more yielding than a dream," as the play and music conclude with a variant of the motto of the wood's magic.

Program notes by:  
Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn  
Wordpros@mindspring.com  
www.wordprosmusic.com

### **Nanette's Aria**

*Sul fil d'un soffio etesio  
Scorrete, agili larve;  
Fra i rami un baglior cesio  
D'alba lunare apparve.  
Danzate! e il passo blando  
Misuri un blando suon.  
Le magiche accoppiando  
Carole alla canzon.*

*Erriam sotto la luna  
Scegliendo fior da fiore,  
Ogni corolla in core  
Porta la sua fortuna.  
Coi gigli e le viole  
Scrivian de' nomi arcani,  
Dalle fatate mani  
Germogliano parole,  
Parole illuminate  
Di puro argento e d'or,  
Carni e malie. Le Fate  
Hanno per cifre i fior.*

### **Juliette's Aria**

*Je veux vivre  
Dans ce rêve qui m'enivre  
Ce jour encore,  
Douce flamme  
Je te garde dans mon âme  
Comme un trésor!  
Je veux vivre, etc.  
Cette ivresse de jeunesse  
Ne dure, hélas! qu'un jour!  
Puis vient l'heure  
Où l'on pleure.  
Loin de l'hiver morose  
Laisse moi, laisse moi sommeiller  
Et respirer la rose,  
Avant de l'effeuiller.  
Ah! - Ah! - Ah!  
Douce flamme!  
Reste dans mon âme  
Comme un doux trésor  
Longtemps encore.  
Ah! - Comme un trésor  
Longtemps encore.*

On the breath of a fragrant breeze  
fly nimble spirits;  
through the branches appears  
the blue gleam of the rising moon.  
Dance! And let your soft steps  
fit the soft music,  
joining magic  
dancing to the song.

Let us wander beneath the moon,  
picking among the flowers;  
every blossom carries in its center  
its own fortune.  
With lilies and violets  
let us write secret names:  
From our enchanted hands  
let there spring  
words illuminated with  
pure silver and gold,  
poems and charms.  
The fairies have flowers as their letters.

I want to live  
In this dream that intoxicates me  
For yet a long time!  
Sweet flame,  
I hold you in my soul  
like a treasure.  
I want to live, etc.  
This intoxication of youth  
Lasts, alas, but a day,  
Then comes the time  
When one weeps.  
Far away from the grim winter  
Permit me, permit me to dream,  
And breathe the rose's scent,  
Before picking it.  
Ah! - Ah! - Ah!  
sweet flame,  
Remain in my soul  
Like a sweet treasure  
For a long time still.  
Ah! like a treasure  
for a long time still.

### **Patria Oppressa**

*Patria oppressa  
Patria oppressa! il dolce nome  
No, di madre aver non puoi,*

### **Oppressed Homeland**

Oppressed homeland! You cannot  
Have the sweet name of mother  
Now that you have become

*Or che tutta a figli tuoi  
Sei conversa in un avel.  
D'orfanelli e di piangenti  
Chi lo sposo e chi la prole  
Al venir del nuovo Sole  
S'alza un grido e fere il Ciel.  
A quel grido il Ciel risponde  
Quasi voglia impietosito  
Propagar per l'infinito,  
Patria oppressa, il tuo dolor.  
Suona a morto ognor la squilla,  
Ma nessuno audace è tanto  
Che pur doni un vano pianto  
A chi soffre ed a chi muor.*

### **Willow Song**

*Mia madre aveva una povera ancella,  
innamorata e bella.  
Era il suo nome Barbara.  
Amava un uom che poi l'abbandonò;  
cantava un canzone:  
la canzon del Salice.  
Mi disciogli le chiome. . .  
Io questa sera ho la memoria piena  
di quella cantilena. . .*

*“Piangea cantando  
nell'erma landa,  
piangea la mesta. . .  
O Salce! Salce! Salce!  
Sedeo chinando  
sul sen la testa!  
Salce! Salce! Salce!  
Cantiamo! Cantiamo!  
il Salce funebre  
sarà la mia ghirlanda.”*

*Affrettati; fra poco giunge Otello.  
Scorreano i rivi fra le zolle in fior,  
gemea quel core affranto,  
e dalle ciglia le sgorgava il cor  
l'amara onda del pianto.  
Salce! Salce! Salce!  
Cantiamo! Cantiamo!  
Il Salce funebre  
sarà la mia ghirlanda.  
Scendean 'augelli a vol dai rami cupi  
verso quel dolce canto.  
E gli occhi suoi piangean tanto, tanto,  
da impietosir le rupi.  
Riponi quest'anello.  
Povera Barbara!*

A tomb for your sons.  
From orphans and mourners  
Some for husbands, others for children,  
At the dawn of every day  
Rises a cry to Heaven.  
And Heaven responds to that cry  
As if you, oppressed homeland,  
Want ruthlessly  
To send your sadness  
Out into the infinite  
The bell tolls for every death,  
But no one is brave enough  
To shed a tear in vain  
For those who suffer and die.

My mother had a poor maidservant,  
she was in love and pretty;  
her name was Barbara;  
she loved a man who then abandoned her.  
She used to sing a song,  
the song of “The Willow”.  
Unbind my hair.  
This evening my memory is haunted  
by that old refrain.

“She wept as she sang  
on the lonely heath,  
the poor girl wept,  
O Willow, Willow, Willow!  
She sat with her head  
upon her breast,  
Willow, Willow, Willow!  
Come sing! Come sing!  
The mourning willow  
shall be my garland.”

Make haste; Othello will soon be here.  
“The fresh streams ran between the flowery  
banks, she moaned in her grief,  
in bitter tears which through her eyelids sprang  
her poor heart sought relief.  
Willow! Willow! Willow!  
Come sing! Come sing!  
The mourning willow  
shall be my garland.  
Down from dark branches flew the birds  
towards the sweet singing.  
Sufficient were the tears that she did weep  
that stoned her sorrow shared.”  
Lay this ring by.  
Poor Barbara!

*Solea la storia  
con questo semplice suono finir:  
“Egli era nato per la sua gloria,  
io per amar. . .”  
Ascolta. Odo un lamento.  
Taci. Chi batte a quella porta?  
“Io per amarlo e per morir. . .  
Cantiamo! Cantaimo!  
Salce! Salce! Salce!”  
Emilia, addio.  
Come m'ardon le ciglia!  
È presagio di pianto.  
Buona notte.  
Ah! Emilia, Emilia, addio,  
Emilia, addio!*

*Ave Maria, piena di grazia, eletta  
fra le spose e le vergini sei tu,  
sia benedetto il frutto, o benedetta,  
di tue materne viscere, Gesù.  
Prega per chi adorando a te si prostra,  
prega nel peccator, per l'innocente, e  
pel debole oppresso e pel possente,  
misero anch'esso, tua pietà dimostra.  
Prega per chi sotto l'oltraggio piega  
la fronte e sotto la malvagia sorte;  
per noi, per noi tu prega, prega  
sempre e nell'ora della morte nostra,  
prega per noi, prega per noi, prega.  
Ave Maria. . .  
nell'ora della morte.  
Ave! . . .Amen!*

The story used to end  
with this simple phrase:  
“He was born for glory,  
I to love...”  
Hark! I heard a moan.  
Hush... Who knocks upon that door?  
“I to love him and to die.  
Come sing! Come sing!  
Willow! Willow! Willow!”  
Emilia, farewell.  
How mine eyes do itch!  
That bodes weeping.  
Good night.  
Ah! Emilia, Emilia, farewell!  
Emilia, farewell!

Hail Mary, full of grace,  
blessed amongst wives and maids art thou,  
and blessed is the fruit, o blessed one,  
of thy maternal womb, Jesu.  
Pray for those who kneeling adore thee,  
pray for the sinner, for the innocent  
and for the weak oppressed; and to the powerful,  
who also grieves, thy sweet compassion show.  
Pray for him who bows beneath injustice  
and ‘neath the blows of cruel destiny;  
for us, pray thou for us, pray  
for us always, and at the hour of our death  
pray for us, pray for us, pray!  
Hail Mary ...  
and at the hour of our death.  
Hail! Amen!