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The Sound of the Risorgimento

The Political Message of the Risorgimento in Verdi's Macbeth

“Oh patria terra, alfin io ti rivedo, terra sí cara e desiata! ... Sempre di te la mente si pascea” - “Oh native land, I see you again at last, land so dear and longed for! ... Always my mind nurtured itself with thoughts of you” (*Oberto*, Act I, Sc. 3)

Nationalism and passion for his country are already present since Verdi's very first opera; themes that would ring true in most of his works to follow. And how could Verdi restrain himself from lending voice to this sentiment that embodied the highest ideal of his historical time? The Italian unification movement known as the Risorgimento had set its roots with the Congress of Vienna in 1815, when Verdi was only two years old, and would last well into 1870 with the Capture of Rome. As Muti describes, Verdi was “a son of the Risorgimento”, became a member of the Italian parliament in 1861, and a Senator for life in 1874 (Muti, 133). Revisiting a popular Italian commonplace, Muti mentions how, when he was growing up, his family used to teach him that “the fathers of the country were Vittorio Emanuele, Mazzini, Garibaldi, .. and Verdi”. Indeed this is a concept that holds true to this day: in traditional Italian culture, the composer's name ranks with its most beloved patriots and the first king of a united Italy. The Risorgimento, and its moral and philosophical ideas supporting a political commitment, marked three generations in the history of Italy. My own family preserves a number of documents attesting arrests for suspicion of anti-Austrian activism, expatriation, seizure of assets,

and pleas to re-acquire citizenship of the Lombardo-Veneto kingdom, while my paternal great grandfather Ballarin grew bearing as his first name ‘Attilio Bandiera’, in honor of the patriot martyr who fought to free our country. It does not come as a surprise that Verdi takes inspiration from a nationalistic spirit in his works to incorporate the current events of the time in his stage performances. In essence it was a “tool for success”, a “favor for the public” since it could help make some of the plots Verdi tackled in his operas more relatable to his time (Muti, 134). While *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi* are among Verdi’s most known works for bearing a stronger, and more obvious, patriotic message, Verdi’s *Macbeth* is no exception. This statement finds evidence when analyzing the historical events surrounding its composition, the pre-existing Shakespearian themes of monarchy and oppressed lands present in both renderings of *Macbeth* , and Verdi’s operatic addition, namely the impact of the exile chorus.

In the *Macbeth* opera, Act IV opens with a piece referred to as “some of the most beautiful music Verdi ever wrote”, the “Patria Oppressa” chorus of exiles, an original element that Verdi and Boito did not transpose from Shakespeare’s work (Fleming, 23). Yet, what are some of the characteristics that make the “Patria Oppressa” chorus stand out? It is important first to examine the chorus separately from its musical connotations, focusing on its background, historical overview, and text of the aria. In 1836, eleven years before Verdi’s *Macbeth*, Giuseppe Mazzini, an Italian politician, journalist, and activist for the unification of Italy released his “Philosophy of Music”, an essay where Mazzini defines what he believed to be the role of music, primarily opera, and the proper way to approach its composition. Mazzini explains that opera is especially significant due to its resonance as a medium of both spiritual and political expression, which all forms of

art should aim at embodying. Despite “his obvious nationalistic bias and fervor” and considering that Mazzini was not primarily a musicologist, his message still “provides a key to the music of his own day” (Seay, 25). When Verdi’s first version of *Macbeth* came on the stage in 1847, the original edition of his “Patria Oppressa” chorus introduced a novelty, a much different effect than the typical one of choruses from primo ottocento opera, such as Bellini and Donizetti. Riall and Patriarca in their “The Risorgimento Revisited” discuss how “even works that were not overly political, such as *Macbeth*’s ‘Patria Oppressa’ came to take a new meaning and significance when compared to primo ottocento choruses.” (Riall & Patriarca, 45). Verdi achieved this result while maintaining many of the primo ottocento’s style conventions, yet clearly diverging from the spirit of it for his interest and ability to incorporate the events that were developing in the Italian political scenario. In the opera’s context of the chorus, Scottish exiles are lamenting the loss of their homeland and denounce the oppression caused by Macbeth’s blind power. Together with the plot, the libretto’s text is the other element that Verdi elects not to alter when he entirely rewrites the music for his 1865 revision of the opera. In fact, Gossett mentions how “Verdi liked Piave’s verses enough to use them without change both in the 1847 and 1865 versions” (Gossett, 32). Piave’s text itself contains a clear support and encouragement to seek freedom from oppression that could therefore easily apply to Italy’s oppression from foreign rule, mainly Austrian.

“Oppressed homeland! No, the sweet name of mother you can’t have now that you’ve become a tomb for all your sons. Of orphans and those crying for husbands and for children, at the rising of a new sun, a cry rises to Heaven. To that cry, Heaven replies, as if moved by pity: oppressed homeland, your pain

propagates forever. The bell tolls constantly for death, but no one is as bold to shed a vain tear for those who suffer and those who die.”

- (A direct translation of ‘Patria Oppressa’)

As to its historical timeline, Verdi’s first version of *Macbeth* was performed on stage in Florence (which two decades later will become the first capital of unified Italy) a year prior to the revolutions of 1848 and the First Italian Independence War. Macbeth’s Scotland offered the perfect example of an ‘oppressed homeland’, a parallel of Italy during the final phase of Risorgimento, when the effects of constraint to foreign rule were no longer bearable and times seemed mature for a change. From a literary perspective, the text presents rather precise references, such as the expression “no, the sweet name of mother you can’t have”. In my eyes, this phrase directly relates to the historical circumstance that the Italians could not call Italy a ‘motherland’ per se, because, the country was not united at the time, and was still a broken, infiltrated land. No words by a group of exiles that would create the same effect are to be found in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* play. Verdi and Piave elaborate from Act IV of the play, where Malcom and Macduff discuss Scotland’s state and rule under Macbeth. However, with the introduction of the chorus, they ideally suggest a shift in the setting to connect with Italy’s ongoing political struggle to such an extent, that censors could not oversee it. It comes to no surprise that “the chorus of Scottish exiles was omitted by Austrian censors in many performances due to its inflammatory nature” (Rubin, 2). Such measure is an indirect evidence of how effective and successful Verdi was, through his opera, in denouncing the current political situation and exhorting to reaction.

Although the text itself remains substantially identical, its nature and tone vary in emphasis when examining the two musical settings Verdi composed in 1847 and 1865 respectively. In both instances, a certain psychological effect is achieved by means of having a chorus sing as opposed to an individual. Pastorello explains in his essay on ‘Inflamed choruses: Risorgimento and Melodrama’ how "choruses became the symbolic space where the collective passions of people take form, thanks to their ability to transport the individual to the group" specifically referencing the chorus of exiles in *Macbeth* in support of his claim (Pastorello, 3). The 1847 version of ‘Patria Oppressa’ is more declamatory, reminiscent of the patriotic choruses that became so famous in Verdi’s early operas, despite the minor mode. The chorus enters fully, with all voices, does not alternate with the use of solo sections, and the texture appears more homophonic. In addition, in the first setting of ‘Patria Oppressa’ the vocal line itself is based on a “rhythmically charged” figure, “scale degrees $\hat{3}-\hat{4}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}$ ” (Albright, 2). Melodically, the piece is much more predictable and not nearly as harmonically complex as its 1865 counterpart. On the other hand, the 1865 edition is described as “one of the composer’s greatest choral movements with subtle details of harmony and rhythm in almost every bar”, showcasing Verdi’s matured composition style (Parker, 103). The details described, paired with the softer starting entrance, alternating ‘orphans’ solo sections, and more broken phrases of text with orchestral interludes, all powerfully render the lamenting and pain for the lost homeland. Muti refers to it beautifully as “the notion of a Risorgimento lament” (Muti, 138). As a further consideration, the 1865 chorus better conveys the sentiments of weakness and suffering, expressing them by means of modulatory sections. Rostagnoli compares the choir to “a dispersed nation reunited all together in few, brief

phrases, cut through by dissonances” - the dissonances themselves playing a much more significant, complex role in the later version of the work. It is also crucial to note that the 1865 opera was written on the eve of the Third War of Independence, which marked a loss but also a change for Italy. The new historical scenario contributed to the 1865 version a “greater emotional amplitude” and to its success with "interpret(ing) the 'universal suffering of humans” (Albright, 34). In conclusion, though the setting of the chorus differs from each version in terms of technique and style, both stand out as highlights in the opera and, more importantly, resonated with the sentiment of the Italian public.

While the chorus of exiles is the primary reference to the Risorgimento in Verdi's *Macbeth*, additional notations contained in Act IV are worth mentioning. Among them is the cabaletta ‘La Patria Tradita’, present in Act IV, scene 5, which occurs as Malcolm orders the soldiers to attack Macbeth's army. Its title translates to ‘Our Country Betrayed’ and the cabaletta chorus' brief text centers on a rally to rescue the oppressed homeland, with a reference to the wrath of God who will punish the unjust ruler. While its faster tempo and rhythm does not emerge as profoundly as the exile chorus, ‘La Patria Tradita’ should “not to be read as a simple cabaletta that gives off a western feel” (Rostagno, 140). In fact, this piece fully embodies once again the theme of freedom from evil through suffering. With a specific reference to this scene, Ruminelli argues how it gave Italian patriots a way to manifest in a political way. In the perspective of the call to reaction, he mentions how "at the phrase *'the betrayed homeland, crying, invites us oppressed brothers, let's run to save it'* from ‘Patria Tradita’ there were shouts of consent and approval from the audience" (Ruminelli, 157). This chorus connected its audiences,

and, echoing the spirit of the previous Macduff's aria - which is described as a "grandiose epic of the oppressed" - definitely inspired and created an output for Italians to channel their sentiment on the current political situation and their aspirations through music.

Although Verdi and Piave introduced original elements that were not present in Shakespeare's play, such as the exile chorus, both the playwright and composer's works center on the subjects of a monarchy and a sick, oppressed country: thematic parallels that perfectly relate to the Risorgimento. The notion of the 'sick country' is a main theme in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* since, in the context of the play, Scotland is under a non benevolent rule urging a political movement to bring change. The relevance of this motif to Verdi's Italy during the Risorgimento, when leaders were attempting to implement a political change they saw as beneficial for the country, is easy to understand. Italy suffered from the same illness, and "the remedy which would cure Macbeth's Scotland would also cure be Verdi's Italy. The remedy was the eradication of evil" (Fleming, 69). This statement describes the figure of the monarchy in transition, as represented in the play when Macduff becomes king, starting the process towards the eradication of Macbeth's unjust rule. Verdi's Italy was in a similar state of transition, though its society was far more diverse. While the idea of a republic was favored, a few Risorgimento leaders were striving to re-affirm a single-minded concept of monarchy. The efforts towards setting up Vittorio Emanuele as monarch of a united Italy may be regarded as "a kind of ritual orchestration of admiration for monarchy" (Fleming, 77). Verdi's inspiration to an essentially pro-monarchial play when he was supporting a republican cause is not necessarily contradictory, particularly in the light of his later support of Cavour and the efforts to unite Italy under Vittorio Emanuele in the following decade.

Macbeth is a pro-monarchical play in an era when the grounds for absolute monarchy were completely undermined, an era already engaged in a bourgeois revolution. However, at the time, the debate on republic or monarchy was of minor relevance compared to real priorities, which were freedom from foreign oppression, unification of the country, and the establishment of a just and moral leadership for the benefit of the entire Italian society.

In conclusion, because Verdi lived and composed *Macbeth* during the Risorgimento, a time of powerfully inspiring ideals, it is natural to find its resonance in his work, especially since he had embraced Mazzini's theory of music and art in general as an instrument to civically and morally educate people. Secondly, drawing from Shakespeare as a dramatic source, Verdi restates the relevance of content of an Elizabethan era production to nineteenth-century Italy through the themes of the monarchy and 'sick country', which can be appropriately transposed to interpret the sentiment of suffering and the aspirations of the Italian nation. Thirdly, Verdi is firmly rooted and educated in the solid tradition of his time, and this fundamental trait explains how he achieved to add his 'revolutionary' flair respecting the strict boundaries of the musical conventions of primo ottocento operas. He never denied the musical tradition of his time, yet conformed, added, and revived it with a new found purpose. Thus, in *Macbeth*'s 'Patria Oppressa' chorus the composer's stance within the context of the Risorgimento finds an explicit definition. In the final analysis, Verdi borrows from Shakespeare's drama, which belongs to a much earlier stage of the same European bourgeois-democratic revolution, for specific 'Risorgimentale' purposes, in a relatively simple and even blatant manner. Simultaneously, he "exploited the dramatic potential in

the structure of the Shakespearean work and re-defined the content with the significance he intended for his revolutionary age” (Rostagno, 24). The success of his transposition is achieved in part by means of simplifying the psychological framework of the original play. He created unequivocal symbols of Good (Banquo, Macduff, Duncan, and, most importantly, the exile Chorus) and Evil (Macbeth and Lady Macbeth) with which to play out the drama of eradicating evil from society and restoring healthy government. The symbols were easily identifiable to the contemporary audience who hailed Verdi as one of their spokesmen in the years of the national struggle for unity. In a sense, Verdi has shifted the emphasis from the tragedy of Macbeth to the tragedy and triumph of the Italian people. *Macbeth* can not be defined as a great opera in terms of combination of musical and dramatic brilliance, in fact, musically would be the weakest of Verdi’s adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays as operas, not to mention the disjointed feel of the work due to its ‘quilted’ 1847/1865 musical composition. Yet, it comes to no question that *Macbeth* deserves a nobler position in the operatic repertory than it currently enjoys not only for its musical innovation technique, but especially for its primary importance in the history of the Italian Risorgimento. Verdi’s successful attempt to convey a moral political message into opera with *Macbeth* ultimately decided the future of the composer’s production, and led the way to operas that would further deepen into this direction, establishing Verdi’s fame not only as a powerful musician of profound expression for its contents, but also as a true patriot and beloved Father of the Italian nation.

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