



Giuseppe Verdi

1813-1901

Most people, on hearing the name, Giuseppe Verdi, are aware that he was the greatest composer of Italian Opera in the Nineteenth Century. But how many Americans also know that his very name became the rallying cry of the movement for the unification of Italy, and that one of his arias was sung throughout Italy as a virtual National Anthem, before there was even an Italian Nation?

Born in a village outside of Parma in the midst of the turmoil and revolutions spreading throughout Europe following the French Revolution and its aftermath, Verdi could not help being influenced by the calls for the liberation of the peoples of the Italian peninsula from foreign occupation and from the economic backwardness of feudalism that dominated so much of the country.

When his first successful opera, *Nabucco* (Nebuchadnezzar) was performed in 1842 in Milan, the hymn “*Va Pensiero*”, sung by the Jewish people in exile in Babylon asking God to free them so they could return to their homeland, was taken up by Italians everywhere as the mantra for their own liberation from Austria in the North, the Papal States in the Center, and the Bourbons in the South.

Leading the call for the unification of Italy were political voices like the Count Cavour of Piedmont, a Monarchist in favor of expanding the rule of Piedmont into all of Italy; Garibaldi of Nice, who learned military tactics in South America and eventually led the “*Mille*” to liberate most of Southern Italy; Manzoni, the author of *I Promessi Sposi* (The Betrothed), a tale of lovers separated by political upheaval in the Middle Ages; and Mazzini, the religious mystic on the Radical Left who tried to rally “Young Italy” to support a people’s Democratic Republic.

Because of the backlash against the Reign of Terror in France in the 1790s, most Italians chose to follow the moderate “Liberal” (industrialist/bourgeois or Middle Class) approach of the Piemontesi, under King Victor Emmanuel. But once unification was achieved, the promise of moderation and liberation was not fully realized because of the overly centralized and bureaucratic approach of the Piemontese to government, causing many people of Southern Italy to emigrate to the Americas and even to Australia by the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.

Nevertheless, by the middle of the 19th century, the concept of a unified Italy took hold of the imaginations of most of the peoples of the peninsula, and the phrase “Viva Verdi” was scrawled on walls everywhere, with “Verdi” being understood as an acronym for “Vittorio Emmanuele, Re D'Italìa” (Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy). Verdi himself supported this movement, and was considered a “conservative” in his approach to revolution (!)

In all, Verdi wrote over twenty highly successful operas, most of which deplored corruption, political machinations and oppression. Three of these were based on Shakespeare's plays: *Macbeth*, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, the last of which, written toward the end of his life, was his only comedy. Of the rest: *Aida*, *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*, are among the most popular in the Italian Repertory. *La Forza del Destino*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Don Carlos* and *Simon Boccanegro*, as well as the less well known *Ernani* and *Giovanna D'Arco* (Joan of Arc!) all have political overtones, and Verdi had to fight the censors in many places where his operas were performed. Upon the death of Manzoni in 1874, Verdi also wrote his extraordinary commemoration of the author, “*Messa Da Requiem*”, performed last year by the New Orleans Opera.

So, was it an accident that Verdi became the symbol of Italy at a time when there was no such country, and that he managed to escape political retribution from those opposed to his very goals and ideals? Well, if it is possible to be both a “conservative” and a “revolutionary” at the same time—Verdi succeeded indeed---without giving up his own vision of the future. He lived long enough to see the unification of the entire country from Sicily in the South to Rome and the Papal States in the Center, and Tuscany, Venice, Lombardy and Piedmont in the North. Victor Emmanuel had to give up Savoy and Nice in the process (an act that really angered Garibaldi), but the area from the Alps to the tri-cornered Island of Sicily, were all united by the time of his death in 1901.

Viva Verdi!