

Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves (Va' Pensiero)
(Coro di Schiavi Ebrei)

“Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves,” also known as “Va’ Pensiero,” is a chorus from the third act of the opera *Nabucco* by Giuseppe Verdi. Written in 1842 based on a libretto by Temistocle Solera, this SATB Choral version was arranged by Greg Pliska in 1994.

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Lyrics

Italian

Va', pensiero, sull'ali dorate;
va', ti posa sui clivi, sui colli,
ove olezzano tepide e molli
l'aure dolci del suolo natal!

Del Giordano le rive saluta,
di Sionne le torri atterrate...
Oh mia patria sì bella e perduta!
Oh membranza sì cara e fatal!

Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati,
perché muta dal salice pendi?
Le memorie nel petto raccendi,
ci favella del tempo che fu!

O simile di Sòlima ai fati
traggi un suono di crudo lamento,
o t'ispiri il Signore un concerto
che ne infonda al patire virtù.

Translation in English

Fly, thought, on wings of gold;
go settle upon the slopes and the hills,
where, soft and mild, the sweet airs
of our native land smell fragrant!

Greet the banks of the Jordan
and Zion's toppled towers...
Oh, my country so lovely and lost!
Oh, remembrance so dear and so fraught with despair!

Golden harp of the prophetic seers,
why dost thou hang mute upon the willow?
Rekindle our bosom's memories,
and speak of times gone by!

Mindful of the fate of Jerusalem,
either give forth an air of sad lamentation,
or else let the Lord imbue us
with fortitude to bear our sufferings!

I. Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves

Va', pensiero is a chorus from the third act of *Nabucco* by Giuseppe Verdi, with words by Temistocle Solera, inspired by Psalm 137. Known as Verdi's "Jewish" work of art, it recollects the story of Jewish exiles from Babylon after the loss of the First Temple in Jerusalem. The opera with its powerful chorus established Verdi as a major composer in 19th century Italy.

Some scholars initially regarded it as an anthem for Italian patriots, who were seeking to unify their country in the years up to 1861 and free it from foreign control (the chorus' theme of exiles singing about their homeland, and its lines like *O mia patria, si bella e perduta* / "O my country, so lovely and so lost" was thought to have resonated with many Italians). However, much of modern scholarship has refuted this concept and it fails to see connections between Verdi's 1840s and 1850s operas and Italian nationalism, with the exception of some of the sentiments expressed in his 1843 opera, *I Lombardi*.

On various occasions, it has been suggested that "Va' pensiero" replace the Inno di Mameli as the Italian National Anthem,¹ and more recently has been appropriated by the Italian Northern Separatist movement, the Lega Nord, as the National Anthem of the imaginary Padania.

II. Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves

The first stage of our 'drama', the creation of Verdi's third opera, *Nabucco*, and his first triumph at La Scala, is again reliant on the composer's recollections, an Autobiographical Sketch he allowed to be published some forty years after the event. After the disaster of *Un giorno di regno*, Verdi says that he vowed to renounce composition entirely. He was wooed back to composing only reluctantly and gradually. And so, far from being just 'the next opera', *Nabucco*, first performed in 1842, became in some sense 'the first opera': a work without significant antecedents. Such a strategy, whether intentionally or not, has encouraged us to enmesh the opera in political, religious and personal dramas.

As soon as we examine the phenomenon of *Nabucco* closely, we find one curious fact: that what I want to call the 'myth' surrounding the opera revolves largely around just one piece, the famous chorus of Hebrew slaves in Act III. The words of this chorus, 'Va pensiero sull'ali dorate', are simple indeed:

'Go thoughts on golden wings, / go rest upon the slopes, the hills, / where, soft and mild, the breezes / of our homeland smell so sweet! / Greet the banks of the Jordan, / the ruined towers of Zion... / Oh, my homeland so beautiful and lost! / Oh remembrance so dear and fateful!'

These words are, on the surface, an invitation to sentimentality that Verdi takes up in full in his orchestral introduction, trilling flute and all; but when the vocal line begins, all that word-painting goes out of the window. The melody is simple, disarmingly so: a series of symmetrical melodic phrases, with no rhythmic or harmonic surprises, just a simple alternation of dotted rhythms and triplets over a rocking accompaniment. Most surprisingly, though, the chorus sing mostly in unison, as if they are one powerful, collective voice (Rossini had it just right when he called the piece 'not so much a chorus as an aria for sopranos, altos, tenors and basses'). When the massed voices break into harmony, they do so in nothing more elaborate with the parallel thirds so typical of Italian folk music.

This new, hyper-direct voice that Verdi had discovered took Italian opera by storm. Within a few years, *Nabucco* had been performed all over Italy and in many far-flung places around the globe. A few years after that, with several more, equally successful operas under his belt, Verdi had overtaken all his rivals and predecessors, becoming (and remaining to this day) Italy's most famous and most popular opera composer.

Let's return for a moment to the Autobiographical Sketch and see precisely what Verdi says about how *Nabucco* came into being. In the dark days after *Un giorno di regno* he has rejected all offers of librettos, but eventually one is forced on him by the impresario at La Scala, Bartolomeo Merelli. He trudges home with it:

'Along the way I felt a kind of vague uneasiness, a supreme sadness, an anguish that welled in the heart!... I went home and, with a violent gesture, threw the manuscript on the table and stood before it. As it fell, the sheaf of pages opened on its own; without knowing how, my eyes stared at the page that lay before me, and this line appeared to me: 'Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate...'

I glanced over the following lines and received a deep impression from them, especially since they were almost a paraphrase of the Bible, which I always found pleasure in reading. I read one passage, I read two: then, steadfast in my intention of not composing, I made an effort of will, forced myself to close the script, and went off to bed!... No good... *Nabucco* was trotting about in my head!... Sleep would not come: I got up and read the libretto, not once, but two, three times, so often that in the morning you could say that I knew the entire libretto by heart.'

The rest, as they say, was history.

The most remarkable thing about this account was not that people believed it at the time (the Sketch was first published in 1879): back then, people, particularly Italian people, had reasons to do so. 'Va pensiero' was already becoming canonic, becoming the most famous piece in all Verdi and firmly entrenched in the national consciousness. What's more, the age was generally prone to 'anecdotal' biographies and autobiographies: flowery artistic justifications and confessions, as generous in narrative flair as they were miserly in documentary corroboration. No: what's astonishing is that scholars continued to repeat this account throughout the twentieth century, quoting it as if it were a reliable record of an historical event. They did this even though, elsewhere in the Sketch (and rather creepily), Verdi manipulated the death dates of his two young children, having them and his young wife expire within months of each other rather than years in order to intensify the pathetic reach of his story about the failure of *Un giorno di regno*. Such lapses seemed not to matter to scholars once 'Va pensiero' became Verdi's topic. The numinous moment, the miraculous appearance of the 'right' text, was too perfect: 'As it fell, the sheaf of pages opened on its own; without knowing how, my eyes stared at the page that lay before me'. What is going on when such accounts are accepted as fact?

The explanation is not hard to find. It lies in the fact that pieces such as 'Va pensiero' became, and to some degree have remained, entangled in an alluring tale about opera and politics, a neat tying-together of the two that we seem willing and eager to consume again and again. According to this story, 'Va pensiero' and certain other Verdi choruses of the early and mid 1840s became a rallying cry of the Italian 'Risorgimento': their new manner energized the Italian national consciousness, encouraged the masses to the barricades in the revolutions of 1848 and generally accompanied the formation of the nation state in 1859-60. There is, though, a small problem with this story: so far as the 1840s are concerned, there's hardly any historical evidence to support it.

It's true that operatic performances in Italy were occasionally the site of public demonstrations during the immediate run up to the 1848 revolutions, just as they had been to the revolutions in 1830; but Verdi's music was not involved such demonstrations much more than other composers: indeed, several others, in particular gentle, lachrymose Bellini, were judged at the time far more incendiary. So why did the connection get made? After all, although it was inevitable that the opera house, as an important (sometimes virtually the only) meeting-place for the urban bourgeoisie, occasionally became caught up in the century's great bourgeois revolutions, it was

far more often a place where the ruling classes could rely on stability and an opportunity to display power. What's more, as the century progressed and revolutionary movements embraced an ever-wider socio-economic spectrum, a large element of the revolutionary population was excluded from all but the humblest of operatic representations.

But Verdi's case was special: by the 1860s and 1870s, when Italy did achieve statehood and was looking anxiously around for national monuments to symbolise its new nation, his early music lay conveniently by, and (as we've seen, with not a little help from the great man himself) was found eminently fit for purpose. And so arose the myth of 'Va pensiero' and a few other Verdi choruses: a myth that has remained in stubborn currency ever since. The chorus has furnished a soundtrack for countless groups wishing to create a simple sense of 'Italianness': from the most benign to the trivial to the most destructive. Emphatically in the last of these categories, Mussolini's regime was, for example, a great propagator of the patriotic image of Verdi, and for obvious reasons. In 1941, and in spite of quite serious military distractions, the Duce ordered extensive celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of Verdi's death. But appropriations of 'Va pensiero' go both backwards and forwards from this grim moment: backwards to Verdi's attempts to boost its significance in his autobiographical tales; forwards to its appearance in TV advertisements, and even as the 'Padanian hymn' of the north Italian separatist group, the Lega Nord.

None of this is to deny that opera in the early nineteenth century was in many areas inescapably bound up with the idea of nation and national representation. Nor is it to deny that 'Va pensiero' is indeed an extraordinary piece of choral music: it would not have been elevated to its positions both present and past without its potent mixture of melodic single-mindedness and blatantly popular appeal. But we need to bear in mind that political 'events' and operatic 'events' are very different, their relationship often complex and subterranean. In this case, Verdi's reputation as 'bard of the Italian Risorgimento' was real enough, but it was constructed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when a young, newly consolidated, fragile Italy urgently required cultural monuments in order to create a sense of national identity: a moment in which the gentle nostalgia of 'Va pensiero' became a potent recollection of simpler times.

III. Nabucco

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) first gained international notoriety as an operatic composer with **Nabucco**. Its portrayal of oppressed Hebrews was understood as a political statement, and V.E.R.D.I (as an acronym for *Vittorio Emmanuele, Re d'Italia*) became synonymous with the movement to free and unify Italy.

Nabucco premiered at La Scala in 1842. Taking place in Jerusalem and Babylon in 587 B.C., Jerusalem has been defeated by Nabucco, King of Assyria, but his daughter Fenena is held hostage by the Hebrews and their priest Zaccaria. Ismaele, a Hebrew with whom she is in love, allows Fenena to escape to her father and repulses the advances of her warrior sister Abigaille. The Hebrews are taken captive to Babylon. Enraged by the favor shown her sister by both Ismaele and Nabucco (who has made Fenena regent), Abigaille discovers she is not Nabucco's

daughter, but a child of slaves, and swears vengeance on all. Nabucco returns, declaring himself both King and God, is struck by lightning, and temporarily loses his sanity. When his reason returns, he prays for forgiveness to Jehovah, and saves the Hebrews. Abigaille poisons herself and dies repentant.

The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves takes place towards the conclusion of the opera. The chorus illustrates the hopes and dreams of freedom for the captive Hebrews.

Based on material from the Metropolitan Opera Encyclopedia, 1987 by the Metropolitan Opera Guild.

IV. Nabucco

Nabucco (short for **Nabucodonosor**, English **Nebuchadnezzar**) is an opera in four acts by Giuseppe Verdi to an Italian libretto by Temistocle Solera, based on the biblical story and the play by Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu. It is Verdi's third opera and the one which is considered to have permanently established his reputation as a composer.

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

Its first performance took place on 9 March 1842 at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan under the original name. The definitive name for the opera and the protagonist were attributed at a performance at the San Giacomo Theatre of Corfu, in September, 1844.

Performance history

The best-known number from the opera is the "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves", *Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate* / "Fly, thought, on golden wings", a chorus which is regularly given an encore when performed today, but until mid-2008 (with encores during *La fille du regiment*), it is the only encore the Metropolitan Opera has ever allowed.

The soprano role of Abigaille is unique in that it has been the downfall of a number of singers. Elena Souliotis and Anita Cerquetti sang it before they were ready, and its high tessitura ruined their voices. Maria Callas sang it only three times and only a live performance from 1949 was recorded. Leontyne Price and Joan Sutherland refused to sing it. While no soprano has become known as a "great Abigaille", Ghena Dimitrova (1941 – 2005) was a notable exponent of the role.

While not regularly performed, *Nabucco* has been part of the Metropolitan Opera's roster since it was first presented there during 1960/61 season. It is the only early Verdi opera apart from *Ernani* and *Luisa Miller* which has received regular performances at the Met in recent times, having been presented in 2001, 2003, 2004, and 2005.

Other companies have given it, including San Francisco Opera (1982), and in 1995 it appeared as part of the Sarasota Opera's "Verdi Cycle".

Critical reaction

Verdi commented that, "with this opera, my artistic career may be said to have begun". *Nabucco* was an instant success, dominating Donizetti's and Pacini's operas playing nearby. While the public went mad with enthusiasm, the critics tempered their approval of the opera.

Amusingly, one critic who found *Nabucco* revolting was Otto Nicolai, the composer to whom the libretto was first offered. A thoroughly Prussian-bred man, Nicolai felt at odds with emotional Italian opera while he lived near Milan. After refusing to accept the libretto proposal from Merelli, Nicolai began work on another offer called *Il Proscritto*. Its disastrous premiere in March 1841 forced Nicolai to cancel his contract with Merelli and flee to Vienna. From there he learned of the success of *Nabucco* and was enraged. "Verdi's operas are really horrible," he wrote. "He scores like a fool — technically he is not even professional — and he must have the heart of a donkey and in my view he is a pitiful, despicable composer ... ". Additionally, he described *Nabucco* as nothing but "rage, invective, bloodshed and murder."

Nicolai's opinions were in the minority, however, and he has today become comparatively obscure. *Nabucco* secured Verdi's success until his retirement from the theatre, twenty-nine operas (including some revised and updated versions) later.

V. Nabucco

It is a wonder *Nabucco* was ever composed. Even though he had a contract from La Scala, Verdi, who had recently lost his wife and remaining child to a mysterious disease, had no appetite for work. The *Nabucco* libretto languished in a corner of Verdi's room for five months while the depressed composer read cheap novels. One day he picked it up, set the last scene, and in three months he had completed the opera. Numerous complications delayed its premiere until the following spring; it might not have been staged without the intervention of Giuseppina Srepponi (who became Verdi's wife years later) and Giorgio Ronconi, both leading singers of the day, who created the roles of Abigaille and Zaccaria.

The importance of the chorus in *Nabucco* makes it unique in the Verdi canon. As Julian Budden has written: "*Nabucco*" is a drama not of people but of *a* people." Each of the principal characters has a strong profile, but none is developed. The opera, divided not into acts but into parts, is static, "such action as occurs being telescoped into a moment's scuffle. *Nabucco*, more than any other of Verdi's operas, resembles a series of vast tableaux, rather than a drama relentlessly moving towards its denouement."

Even with a weak last act, the crude marches and chorus of the Levites, mostly commonplace recitatives, a few conventional arias, and some unnecessarily noisy orchestration, *Nabucco*

remains the most consistently expressive opera Verdi composed before *Rigoletto*. With all its flaws, it is virtually irresistible.

After its initial popularity at La Scala, *Nabucco* unexpectedly disappeared from the big house's repertory until 1912 and then was unheard until it opened the 1933-34 season. With its political overtones, it was the perfect opera for La Scala to resume postwar operation. After all, "Va pensiero," the great third-act chorus of the Hebrew slaves, had been Italy's unofficial national hymn for over a century.

VI. "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves" and Verdi's Nationalism

Verdi's operas are not merely musical masterpieces; they often include a strong political message. Over the course of his career, Verdi had trouble with government censors who didn't like the messages sent by his operas.

Nabucco, one of Verdi's early operas, premiered in 1842 at La Scala in Milan. The story deals with the Jews enslaved in Babylon, and was particularly meaningful for the Italian people. At the time, Italy was not the sovereign nation it is today; instead, it was divided into city-states which were controlled by foreign powers. The Austrians controlled the northern part of Italy, the Bourbons ruled in Naples, and the Pope held power in Rome and the Papal States. Patriotic sentiment was high, and the *Risorgimento* movement adopted Verdi as a champion (risorgimento means, literally, rising up or rebirth). In the famous chorus "Va, pensiero", the Hebrew slaves reflect sorrowfully on their beloved homeland; it was the perfect expression of nationalism and is still performed today on national occasions.

By 1854 Verdi had allied himself with the monarchists, believing that the best hope for a united Italy lay in Vittorio Emanuele, King of Piedmont and heir of the House of Savoy.

VII. "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves" and Verdi's Nationalism

Music historians have long perpetuated a myth about the famous *Va, pensiero* chorus sung in the third act of *Nabucco*. The myth reports that, when the *Va, pensiero* chorus was sung in Milan, then belonging to the large part of Italy under Austrian domination, the audience, responding with nationalistic fervor to the exiled slaves' lament for their lost homeland, demanded an encore of the piece. As encores were expressly forbidden by the government at the time, such a gesture would have been extremely significant. However, recent scholarship puts this to rest. Although the audience did indeed demand an encore, it was not for *Va, pensiero* but rather for the hymn *Immenso Jehova*, sung by the Hebrew slaves to thank God for saving His people. In light of these new revelations, Verdi's position as the musical figurehead of the Risorgimento has been correspondingly downplayed.

On the other hand, during rehearsals, workmen in the theater stopped what they were doing during *Va, pensiero* and applauded at the conclusion of this haunting melody while the growth of the "identification of Verdi's music with Italian nationalist politics" is judged to have begun in the summer 1846 in relation to a chorus from *Ernani* in which the name of one of its characters, "Carlo", was changed to "Pio", a reference to Pope Pius IX's grant of an amnesty to political prisoners.

The myth of Verdi as Risorgimento's composer also led to claims that the slogan "Viva VERDI" was used throughout Italy to secretly call for *Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia* (Victor Emmanuel King of Italy), referring to Victor Emmanuel II, then king of Sardinia.

The *Chorus of the Hebrews* (the English title for *Va, pensiero*) has another appearance in Verdi folklore. Prior to his body being driven from the cemetery to the official memorial service and its final resting place at the *Casa di Riposo*, Arturo Toscanini conducted a chorus of 820 singers in "Va, pensiero". At the Casa, the *Miserere* from *Il trovatore* was sung.

Verdi was elected as a member of the Chamber of Deputies in 1861 following a request of Prime Minister Cavour but in 1865 he resigned from the office. In 1874 he was named Senator of the Kingdom by king Victor Emanuel II

VIII. Giuseppe Verdi

(born Roncole, 9/10 October 1813; died Milan, 27 January 1901).

He was born into a family of small landowners and taverners. When he was seven he was helping the local church organist; at 12 he was studying with the organist at the main church in nearby Busseto, whose assistant he became in 1829. He already had several compositions to his credit. In 1832 he was sent to Milan, but was refused a place at the conservatory and studied with Vincenzo Lavigna, composer and former La Scala musician. He might have taken a post as organist at Monza in 1835, but returned to Busseto where he was passed over as *maestro di cappella* but became town music master in 1836 and married Margherita Barezzi, his patron's daughter (their two children died in infancy).

Verdi had begun an opera, and tried to arrange a performance in Parma or Milan; he was unsuccessful but had some songs published and decided to settle in Milan in 1839 where his *Oberto* was accepted at La Scala and further operas commissioned. It was well received but his next, *Un giorno di regno*, failed totally; and his wife died during its composition. Verdi nearly gave up, but was fired by the libretto of *Nabucco* and in 1842 saw its successful production, which carried his reputation across Italy, Europe and the New World over the next five years. It was followed by another opera also with marked political overtones, *I lombardi alla prima crociata*, again well received. Verdi's gift for stirring melody and tragic and heroic situations struck a chord in an Italy struggling for freedom and unity, causes with which he was sympathetic; but much opera of this period has political themes and the involvement of Verdi's operas in politics is easily exaggerated.

The period Verdi later called his 'years in the galleys' now began, with a long and demanding series of operas to compose and (usually) direct, in the main Italian centres and abroad: they include *Ernani*, *Macbeth*, *Luisa Miller* and eight others in 1844-50, in Paris and London as well as Rome, Milan, Naples, Venice, Florence and Trieste (with a pause in 1846 when his health gave way). Features of these works include strong, sombre stories, a vigorous, almost crude orchestral style that gradually grew fuller and richer, forceful vocal writing including broad lines in 9/8 and 12/8 metre and above all a seriousness in his determination to convey the full force of the drama. His models included late Rossini, Mercadante and Donizetti. He took great care over the choice of topics and about the detailed planning of his librettos. He established his basic vocal types early, in *Ernani* the vigorous, determined baritone, the ardent, courageous but sometimes despairing tenor, the severe bass; among the women there is more variation.

The 'galley years' have their climax in the three great, popular operas of 1851-3. First among them is *Rigoletto*, produced in Venice (after trouble with the censors, a recurring theme in Verdi) and a huge success, as its richly varied and unprecedentedly dramatic music amply justifies. No less successful, in Rome, was the more direct *Il trovatore*, at the beginning of 1853; but six weeks later *La traviata*, the most personal and intimate of Verdi's operas, was a failure in Venice - though with some revisions it was favourably received the following year at a different Venetian theatre. With the dark drama of the one, the heroics of the second and the grace and pathos of the third, Verdi had shown how extraordinarily wide was his expressive range.

Later in 1853 he went - with Giuseppina Strepponi, the soprano with whom he had been living for several years, and whom he was to marry in 1859 - to Paris, to prepare *Les vêpres siciliennes* for the Opéra, where it was given in 1855 with modest success. Verdi remained there for a time to defend his rights in face of the piracies of the Théâtre des Italiens and to deal with translations of some of his operas. The next new one was the sombre *Simon Boccanegra*, a drama about love and politics in medieval Genoa, given in Venice.

Plans for *Un ballo in maschera*, about the assassination of a Swedish king, in Naples were called off because of the censors and it was given instead in Rome (1859). Verdi was involved himself in political activity at this time, as representative of Busseto (where he lived) in the provincial parliament; later, pressed by Cavour, he was elected to the national parliament, and ultimately he was a senator. In 1862 *La forza del destino* had its premiere at St. Petersburg. A revised *Macbeth* was given in Paris in 1865, but his most important work for the French capital was *Don Carlos*, a grand opera after Schiller in which personal dramas of love, comradeship and liberty are set against the persecutions of the Inquisition and the Spanish monarchy. It was given in 1867 and several times revised for later, Italian revivals.

Verdi returned to Italy, to live at Genoa. In 1870 he began work on *Aida*, given at Cairo Opera House at the end of 1871 to mark the opening of the Suez Canal (Verdi was not present): again in the grand opera tradition, and more taut in structure than *Don Carlos*. Verdi was ready to give up opera; his works of 1873 are a string quartet and the vivid, appealing Requiem in honour of the poet Manzoni, given in 1874-5, in Milan (San Marco and La Scala, aptly), Paris, London and Vienna. In 1879 the composer-poet Boito and the publisher Ricordi prevailed upon Verdi to write another opera, *Otello*; Verdi, working slowly and much occupied with revisions of earlier operas, completed it only in 1886. This, his most powerful tragic work, a study in evil and

jealousy, had its premiere in Milan in 1887; it is notable for the increasing richness of allusive detail in the orchestral writing and the approach to a more continuous musical texture, though Verdi, with his faith in the expressive force of the human voice, did not abandon the 'set piece' (aria, duet etc) even if he integrated it more fully into its context - above all in his next opera.

This was another Shakespeare work, *Falstaff*, on which he embarked two years later - his first comedy since the beginning of his career, with a score whose wit and lightness betray the hand of a serene master, was given in 1893. That was his last opera; still to come was a set of *Quattro pezzi sacri* (although Verdi was a non-believer). He spent his last years in Milan, rich, authoritarian but charitable, much visited, revered and honoured. He died at the beginning of 1901; 28,000 people lined the streets for his funeral.

IX. Temistocle Solera

The author of the Libretto for *Nabucco*, Temistocle Solera, had already collaborated with Verdi in *Oberto*. Born at Ferrara in 1817, he grew up to be an adventurer in the Casanova tradition. While still a child he ran away from his boarding school in Vienna and joined a travelling circus; he was eventually arrested by the Austrian police in Hungary, but not, it is said, before he had enjoyed the "ripe favours" of the manager's wife (he was about thirteen at the time). By 1842 he had made a name for himself as poet, and even composer, with two operas to his credit; and he stood in high regard with Merelli for whom he had written more than one successful libretto.

He remained Verdi's favourite librettist for the next three years; and their connection was only broken when with his work on *Attila* as yet uncompleted he followed in the wake of his singer-wife, Teresa Rosmina, to Spain. His subsequent fortunes as manager in Madrid, "intimate adviser" to Queen Isabella of Spain, editor of a religious magazine in Milan, confidential courier between Napoleon III and the Khedive of Egypt, water-carrier in Leghorn and antique-dealer in Florence, do not concern this book. But he was the right collaborator for Verdi at this stage of his career. He had a flair for bold, swaggering verse and the coup de Theatre - doubtless his circus training had come in useful for the opera of this period.

More than once he was accused of plagiarism. When *Nabucco* was first performed in Paris, Ricordi found to his annoyance that he was liable for a fee of 1,000 francs, due, it had been assumed, to the authors of the play on which the libretto was based. But if so this is extremely puzzling. For in making use of a contemporary French play, Solera was merely following a long-established Italian tradition. Nor was there any secret about this particular case. The play in question, *Nabucodonosor*, by MM. Anicent-Bourgeois and Francis Cornue (Theatre Ambigu-Comique, Paris, 1836) was perfectly well known in Italy in translation and also as a ballet. (*Nabucodonosor*, a historical ballet in five parts composed and conducted by Antonio Cortesi, was given at La Scala, Milan, in the autumn of 1838.) Possibly the answer is to be found in one of Muzio's letters to Barezzi. "Vatel, the impresario of the Italian theatre in Paris, has had to pay out 1,000 francs to somebody who has done a libretto on *Nabucco* and says that Solera has taken his one from it.

X. Greg Pliska

Widely recognized for his broad stylistic range, Greg Pliska is particularly skilled in contemporary music, both popular and classical. In addition to working as a composer, arranger, conductor, and musical director, he also has held a variety of educational roles and has worked with young people around the world.

In 2000, "In a Lake of Fire," a musical-theater production Pliska co-created, won the New England Theatre Conference's Moss Hart Memorial Award. The award is given for the promotion of artistic growth and the development of excellence in theater. The piece is based on the story of Susan Smith of South Carolina, who, in the fall of 1994, allowed her car to roll into a lake with her infant and toddler sons strapped down in the back seat.

In addition to his writing, Pliska has composed music for a wide variety of productions, including "HeartSongs" in 1995, "Verisimilitude" in 1996, and "Confidentially Yours" in 1997. As an orchestrator and arranger, he has worked with a broad array of productions, including the Broadway production of "The Jungle Book" for Theaterworks USA and the New Victory Theater as well as the Candy Simon opera/album of "Romulus Hunt" for Angel Records and the Metropolitan Opera.

As an arts educator, Pliska has also spent many years with prestigious institutions such as the Manhattan School of Music, the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera Guild, and the International Schools Theatre Association. His publications include the 1993 children's songbook "Praise for the Singing" and work with the Metropolitan Opera Choruses for Young Voices.

Pliska earned his B.A. from Williams in 1984, as a music and English double major.

Audio Links and Discography

If you subscribe to iTunes, BuyMusic, Rhapsody or a similar service, keyword in "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves" where you can listen to a sample from each artist. You can download-buy the song from these sites; and also download-buy it as a single cut from some of the CD Albums listed below.

Select YouTubes

Arturo Toscanini:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLkYfppYUwc>

Berliner Phil & Rundfunkchor Berlin - Claudio Abbado:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rD4gWvTXj44&feature=related>

Metropolitan Opera House, James Levine:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BZSqtqr8Qk&feature=related>

Myung-Whun Chung, The Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, at the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0EAL3vXZrM&feature=related>

Select CD Recordings:

Great Opera Choruses, London Symphony:

<http://www.amazon.com/Great-Opera-Choruses/dp/B000000TGP/>

Great Opera Choruses:

<http://www.amazon.com/Great-Opera-Choruses/dp/B000026BKW/>

Verdi Choruses, Coro Dell'Accademia Nazionale Di Santa Cecilia:

<http://www.amazon.com/Verdi-Choruses/dp/B00004T2FO/>

References:

The above article about the song “Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves” was extracted from these websites. For more information, please read the articles:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Va._pensiero

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuseppe_Verdi

<http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/verdi.html>

<http://archive.operainfo.org/broadcast/operaBackground.cgi?id=36&language=1>

<http://www.williams.edu/admin/news/releases/616/>

<http://www.gresham.ac.uk/printtranscript.asp?EventId=569>

Book: The Metropolitan Opera Guide to Recorded Opera: <http://tinyurl.com/b525q3>

Book: The Operas of Verdi, Julian Budden: <http://tinyurl.com/bary3x>