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# Learning to curse at sixty-seven

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What makes Bernard Shaw, for us, the most perfect of Wagnerites is that he did not mince words when he judged the master to have taken a wrong turn. Such a turn came in *Das Rheingold*, and Shaw was quick to expose it, even though he had just spent a chapter elaborating the profound political allegory he discerned in the work:

> In the midst of these far-reaching ideas, it is amusing to find Wagner still full of his ingrained theatrical professionalism, and introducing effects which now seem old-fashioned and stagey with as much energy and earnestness as if they were his loftiest inspirations. When Wotan wrests the ring from Alberic, the dwarf delivers a lurid and blood-curdling stage curse, calling down on its every future possessor care, fear, and death. The musical phrase accompanying this outburst was a veritable harmonic and melodic bogey to mid-century ears, though time has now robbed it of its terrors. It sounds again when Fafnir slays Fasolt, and on every subsequent occasion when the ring brings death to its holder. This episode must justify itself purely as a piece of stage sensationalism. On deeper ground it is superfluous and confusing, as the ruin to which the pursuit of riches leads needs no curse to explain it; nor is there any sense in investing Alberic with providential powers in the matter.[1]

There are other moments in *The Perfect Wagnerite* when Shaw felt the need to insert a tongue-in-cheek distance between himself and some Wagnerian dramatic means or trope, but this one stands out in its length and insistence. It is almost as if a certain embarrassment, otherwise not found, tinted Shaw's reaction to Alberich's curse – as if, perhaps, cursing's very claim to some hidden power – providential power – needed pointed refutation.

Shaw is not alone among operatic exegetes in doubting the stageworthiness of a curse. We could easily enough compile a dossier of complaints lodged against the device. Two more examples will suffice here and also bring us to our true subject, Verdi. The first concerns *Rigoletto*, an opera adapted, as we remember, from Victor Hugo's notorious play *Le Roi s'amuse*. Abramo Basevi, in his generally scandalized chapter on the opera, brings up Hugo's defence of his play but will hear nothing of it. (Basevi surely had no inkling that Verdi had echoed Hugo's defence more than once in his correspondence concerning the adaptation of the play into the opera.) Basevi writes: 'Hugo defended himself against the charge of immorality by saying that the true substance of the drama is the *curse of Saint-Vallier*. But this defence doesn't hold up, since even silly women hardly believe in the effects of such curses'.[2]

Basevi's rejection of Hugo's defence has a cautionary value. It might be possible to argue, in an interpretative strategy seeking anthropological distanciation, that a nineteenth-century Italian audience stood in a different relation to the power of

[1] George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Niblung's Ring* (New York, 1967 [1923]), 30–1.
[2] Abramo Basevi, *Studio sulle opere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Florence, 1859), 184–5.

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cursing than a present-day audience does. I have been tempted to advance such interpretations before, about operatic curses, witches, demons and other supernatural phenomena. (I will mostly resist the temptation here.) Whatever the upshot of such a strategy, however, Basevi warns us that we cannot responsibly advance any argument so reductive as simply to assert that 'they believed in curses in those days'. Even *donniciuole*, he says, were usually not so benighted.

A second example, from the other great *B* of Verdi studies, Julian Budden, brings us to my case – or curse – in point. In words that remind us of Shaw's on Wagner, Budden holds at arm's length the end of the Council Chamber scene in *Simon Boccanegra*. He describes the moment in detail:

> Simon orders Paolo as tribune of the people . . . to repeat his own solemn curse on a certain coward who lurks within the city, and whose name he knows only too well. 'Sia maledetto', cries the Doge in a terrible voice. 'Sia maledetto', Paolo repeats, pale and trembling; and the whole chorus take up the cry, 'Sia maledetto', in a violent tutti diminished seventh to which the tam-tam is added. Then they melt away slowly muttering the fatal words as they go; Paolo runs off with a terrified 'Orror!' This quaint piece of melodrama enabled Verdi to recoup some of the rugged force of the original stretta [from the 1857 version].[3]

Quaint melodrama? Budden's epithet smacks of protesting too much, it seems to me – of a need, to be precise, to reassure the reader of his own distance from such a stage-device even as he re-enacts its force in his prose by his ritualistic, triple invocation of what he calls 'the fatal words'. Looking back, indeed, Budden's need highlights a similar wavering in Basevi (for whom *some* women *might* after all still believe in curses) and even in the tough-shelled Shaw (for whom Alberich's curse, however irrelevant, remains 'lurid and blood curdling').

Conversely, Shaw's and Basevi's discomfort sharpens our sense of Budden's in the face of the curse in *Simon* and helps to broach an interpretative puzzle that confronts us as well: this moment is widely recognized as one of extraordinary musico-dramatic power, yet it presents an operatic topos that seems to arouse a need, broadly felt through opera criticism, to reassure that the power does not arise from any believed-in supernatural force. (In the cases cited here the need undoes the confident sexism of Basevi's account, the overkill of Shaw's, the critical clout of Budden's.) So: aside from some slight and uncanny vestiges, which I insist upon but do not discuss, of cursing's original illocutionary force, where does the power of this curse come from? And, if these vestiges are scant for Shaw, or for Basevi or Budden, another question: whence the defensiveness, the need to hold at arm's length, that seems to speak in these descriptions? Why, to put the question baldly, do these interpreters – or we – shudder with horror *and* blush with embarrassment at these moments?

We can be confident of one thing at the start: there was nothing quaint about the curse in *Simon Boccanegra* to its creators or its first audience. This comes clear from Filippo Filippi's well-known review, in *La perseveranza*, of the 1881 première at La Scala. For Filippi himself the whole Council Chamber scene comprised 'the most

[3] Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols. (New York, 1973–81), II, 314.

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splendid pages of dramatic music [Verdi] ever conceived'. Its climax was the curse: 'The whole Council scene is really marvelous with the debates, the uprising, and the growing development that follows until, one may say, the paroxysm of interest and dramatic suspense when the Doge forces Paolo to curse himself'. Or again: 'the listener is astonished, overpowered by this colorful, expressive music that makes him palpitate and tremble and after the final shout "Sia maledetto" let out a cry of enthusiasm'. The audience Filippi sat among evidently shared his view. 'In the first act', the critic reports, Maurel in the role of the Doge 'aroused enthusiasm on various occasions: in the recognition scene, which had to be repeated; in the last movement of his duet with Maria, and in the whole finale, particularly in the curse'.[4]

As to the importance accorded the moment of the curse by its creators themselves, we may judge from the *disposizione scenica* for *Simon*, compiled in the wake of the La Scala première. The instructions for the first act, after a detailed account of the staging of the curse (to which I will return), close thus:

> A simple reading of this scene will give an idea of its importance. But the dry description of a gesture or of a step forwards or backwards cannot render the dramatic development, the succession of episodes and terrible passions, effective on stage. The above directions only denote in a summary way the various physical positions that characters and crowds must take for musical or dramatic reasons; the scene between the DOGE and PAOLO, however, will live up to its intended interpretation only if *two actors of superior intelligence* know how to extract both its musical and dramatic concepts, and thus reach the aim of interesting and touching the spectator.[5]

These words bear the imprint of Verdi's own concerns, as the editors of the *Carteggio Verdi–Ricordi* for 1880 and 1881 have recognized. The words echo, for instance, the composer's insistence that the person portraying Paolo be 'un baritono attore sopratutto'.[6]

But wait a moment: even these words seem to smack of excess, perhaps of defensiveness – perhaps, indeed, of overcompensation once again in the presence of a curse. A closer look at the *disposizione scenica* may suggest why this is so.

The passage I quoted just now seems to be in line with another admonishment, given pride of place at the very beginning of the book, immediately under the cast of characters. 'The Chorus', it reads, 'must be persuaded not to appear as an insignificant mass, for each of its members represents a character and must act as such, moving on his own account, according to his own feelings in order to ensure the best musical performance, preserving with the others only a certain unity of movement'.[7] What was, in the case of Simon and Paolo, a concern for convincing histrionic skill turned in the case of the chorus into an all-out plea for individualistic,

[4] For a translation of Filippi's review see Hans Busch, *Verdi's 'Otello' and 'Simon Boccanegra' (revised version) in Letters and Documents*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1988), II, 666–72; for the quotations here, 667, 670, 671.

[5] The whole *disposizione scenica* for *Simon Boccanegra* is translated in Busch, II, 423–80; for this passage see 456.

[6] Pierluigi Petrobelli, Marisa di Gregorio Casati and Carlo Matteo Mossa, eds., *Carteggio Verdi–Ricordi 1880–1881* (Parma 1988), 120–1.

[7] Busch, II, 427.

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dramatic truth-to-life. We can imagine too easily the kind of on-stage behaviour of the chorus this remark was meant to forestall; for a century or so now it has travelled under the epithet *melodramatic*.

In the event, however, we need not imagine such behaviour. For the *disposizione scenica* describes it exactly when it comes to detail the actions of the chorus at the moment of the curse itself. To be sure, the lengthy stage directions for this moment exemplify those special acting skills required of the singers playing the parts of Simon and Paolo. But for the chorus they seem to strike a very different tone, one that flatly contradicts the earlier, general admonishment to dramatic realism and individualistic portrayal:

> The DOGE cries out, in a frightening manner, 'Sia maledetto'; then suddenly, with his left hand, he grabs PAOLO's right arm, and with his right hand stretched out towards him, straightaway darkly adds a command, 'E tu ripeti il giuro'.
>
> PAOLO is almost stricken dead by this anathema; his face denotes the greatest fright; he would like to refuse, but, subjugated by the DOGE's eyes, frees himself, takes a step forwards, and tremblingly cries out, 'Sia maledetto'; he then instantly covers his face with his hands, whispering, 'Orrore! Orror!'
>
> Everyone follows this scene with wonder and terror. Except for AMELIA, the action of the others and the Chorus, however, must not be that of people who clearly understand the DOGE's allusions, since no one suspects PAOLO; nevertheless, everybody understands that something terrible is about to happen; this feeling must dominate and pour out of the words that everyone is repeating, 'Sia maledetto'. Precisely on the last syllable of 'maledetto', EVERYBODY (artists and Chorus) takes a big step forwards, stretching out his right arm in a most striking way, as if cursing an invisible character. The DOGE stands motionless, gazing with a contemptuous look at PAOLO, who is crushed and trembling. Then everyone, as if stricken by a mysterious, inexplicable terror, starts withdrawing slowly backwards on the words, 'Sia maledetto!'; these words are gloomily repeated in a low tone, while the arm remains outstretched. The DOGE dominates the center of the stage; PAOLO raising his arms, cries out 'Orror', and flees in despair, pushing his way through the Chorus. The curtain falls immediately . . .[8]

The scene, enacted thus, presents a challenge to the stage director. How can Simon so clearly indicate Paolo as the subject of the curse, and how can Paolo so fearfully react to these indications, to the point of racing off stage in horror, without the chorus or anyone else but Amelia suspecting Paolo's guilt? We might suppose that the superior acting ability called for from the Doge and Paolo by the production book aimed to elicit sufficient subtlety in their gestures and stances so as not to give away the game. But this seems a recourse to special pleading. There is in truth little subtlety in the description of the stances and gestures themselves, and it is more plausible that Verdi and the others thought the performers' acting abilities had to be higher than the average singer's simply to carry off this intense pantomime. In which case these abilities present a director's dilemma: the better developed they are – the more compelling the pantomime – the more they undermine the essential dramatic fact of the situation, also specified in the production book; that is, the fact that 'no one suspects Paolo'.

[8] Busch, II, 455.

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That this moment was from the first difficult to stage is revealed by Eduard Hanslick's review of the Viennese Hofoper performance of the revised *Simon* of 1882. He complained that the too-suggestive acting of Paolo and the overzealous pointing of the chorus made a hash of *who* knows and doesn't know *what* at this moment in the drama.[9] But it seems evident that the hapless Viennese *dramaturg* Hanslick took to task was only doing his best to follow the production book.

The true difficulty here is that Verdi and Boito have constructed a dramatic situation that outstrips the possibilities of the representational codes they work within and have, in the production book, specified. (Might we say that they broach a noumenal limit case of melodramatic acting or that, for a moment here, a Dionysiac force bursts through the careful, illusory controls of Apollinian representation? Perhaps – but not just yet.)

This overstepping of representational codes is clearest, in the *disposizione scenica*, in the behaviour of the chorus. This was the group, remember, that according to the first page of the production book needed to act realistically as independent characters, each moving according to individual feelings. How strikingly, instead, the moment of cursing yokes the choristers together as a single, undifferentiated mass. (It yokes with them, by the way, the benighted principals, Fiesco and Gabriele, and in doing so poses two questions, one serious and one not. Is there ever a moment in this opera when Gabriele is *not* benighted? His reward for unremitting obtuseness: to get the girl and be proclaimed doge. And, more to the point: what kind of power is unleashed here that can sweep into its orbit even Fiesco – that same implacable Fiesco who for a quarter-century has resisted every invitation to the slightest sympathy with his enemy? Clearly it is a force greater than any exerted subjectively by Simon alone.) At any rate, the stylized, unifying choral gestures described in the production book at the dramatic climax of the Council Chamber scene – the staged gestures desired, required at this moment for compelling representation – can only cut against the grain of a truer-to-life individualism elsewhere demanded of the chorus. The moment of the curse pushes towards an asymptote where true-to-life depiction falters. By flaunting the non-realistic choral actions on stage, it opens a rift between representational realism and – something else.

The something else has everything to do with *invisibility*. The peculiar force of this curse – unique, I think, in Verdian dramaturgy – arises not from the fact itself of cursing (again, however, I assert, within brackets, the power of this fact) so much as it comes from the ignorance of most of the people on stage as to *what is going on*. The curse is, in other words, doubly occult. All those whispering 'Sia maledetto!' participate in an act of mysterious, terrifying power, but most of them also set in motion a force whose aim they cannot know – they stand in the dark, so to speak, stretching to the breaking point a Norn's thread. Ignorant of the direction where the illocutionary force of their own words is aimed, they vaguely sense only the effort itself needed to utter them.

[9] Hanslick's review is translated in Busch, II, 673–8; for his complaint see 676.

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In this situation where the voices can hardly comprehend what they whisper, an awesome capacity of Verdi's orchestra is unleashed to enunciate the inarticulable, to speak the unspeakable. Compare the impact of Amelia's glorious F# major call for peace earlier in the finale with the minor-mode inversion of it developed by the orchestra across the curse scene (see Examples 1a and b).

The first is the soaring, gravity-free plea of an individual; it is eloquent enough to convince a populace and be taken up finally by most of its members. This presents the quintessence of human vocal power, in much the same way as does Simon's 'Plebe! Patrizi!' speech adjacent to it. Both are eloquent gestures, we might say, of musical civic humanism – and how apropos it is that Verdi should have thought to invoke Petrarch in the lead-up to them.

The minor-mode inversion of the motive is instead – approximately – the musical crudescence of the curse itself, or perhaps of the curse together with the evil it means to combat. It can have no focused subjective origin, no matter how dominant the Doge might be at this moment, because it is a force that uncannily, even horrifyingly escapes human control and human voicing: for everyone on stage simply because it is a curse (once more I insist); for most of those on stage additionally because they cannot know its target. Amelia's and Simon's earlier pleas are, as it were, Otello and Desdemona singing the love duet, only in a communal register. The curse motive is more like a demonic inversion of the 'bacio' theme.

This orchestral power can be freely loosed only under the noumenal conditions of invisibility the scene constructs. If the curse could be spoken directly and all on stage could participate, one way or another but *knowingly*, in its enunciation, we would find ourselves back in the dramatic situation of *Rigoletto*, Act I. The human voice would not be superseded; Monterone would speak, Rigoletto and the Duke react. The danger of staging the Council Chamber scene as the production book specifies – as that Viennese *dramaturg* tried to do in 1882 – is that it confines us within this more conventional dramatic territory at the very moment the scene opens its wings to fly to a different place. It renders palpable and hence destroys the immaterial reality towards which the scene gestures. Verdi and Boito, again, have outpaced their own dramaturgical means.

I cannot resist generalizing this point further: this moment in *Simon Boccanegra* transcends, in a specifically Kantian rather than generally Romantic sense, the climactic moments of other Verdian internal finales – and of the genre all told. These finales, along with the Rossinian and pre-Rossinian finales from which they descended, built up to a climax of confusion and sheer volume as all the principals and the chorus reacted to the tight knot their plots were twisted into through intrigues, discoveries and peripeties. The final outbursts in such finales were almost always reactions to heart-stopping new events or revelations: banana-peel moments, as we can call them following a memorable description in Budden's first volume on Verdi. The reactions were strong, of course, and always varied, to be sure; but they were responses on all sides to a set of known quantities, to a defined problem or event. The final venting of these reactions, whether in a stretta (as for instance that first scene of *Rigoletto*) or a slow movement (Act I of *Macbeth*) forms, whatever the diversity of the sentiments

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Ex 1a: Verdi, *Simon Boccanegra*, Council Chamber Scene.

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Ex 1b

uttered, a massive, fortified, human, above all *vocal* protest in the face of seemingly intractable but perfectly identifiable difficulties.

The frightening unknowability at the end of the Council Chamber scene brings something qualitatively different to this topos. Here human vocalism is hushed, almost silenced, in the face of mysterious energies. Here there is no venting because there is nothing apparent to vent against. Human forcefulness cedes in the face of a different kind of force. It is no accident that Verdi would return to the attenuated, brass-laden, trill-ridden orchestral lexicon of this moment when he needed to convey the super- or subhuman forces – likewise inarticulable – driving Iago.

I can put off Nietzsche no longer. The force of this curse answers to most of the features of the Dionysiac that he had described, a decade before the revised *Simon*,

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in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Rather than gathering powerful individuals into a protesting human solidarity, it dissolves in its searing liquor the very individualities of the Genoese people, much as the ancient satyr plays of Nietzsche's imagination annihilated Athenian individuality. This force is terrifying, incomprehensible, not to be captured within that most individualistic of faculties of Nietzsche's account, reason. If 'Plebe! Patrizi!' and Amelia's cry of 'Pace!' represent a musical civic humanism, this instead is pre-civic in its ritual: pre-civic anti-humanism, ur-humanism, supernaturalism. And, as I have already suggested, this force in unfolding casts aside as inadequate or irrelevant the codes of dramatic representation that beckon towards it – the reasoned codes Nietzsche saw as the Apollinian counterbalance necessary for drama to exist at all.[10]

At this moment I might well be charged with the old Verdi-baiting trick – it dates back all the way to the 1850s – of painting him as a Wagnerian. This could hardly be further from my intent, however. I might admit to the mischievous desire to substitute a single moment of *Simon* for four hours of *Tristan* as the Dionysiac eruption young Nietzsche so longed to hear. But of assimilating Verdi to Wagner there is no possibility. Indeed Nietzsche himself, in his changing views on Wagner, helps us distinguish the means of the one composer from those of the other. He discerns, in his later, unsettled writings, a fact that his contemporaries were very slow to recognize: that Wagner was not so much consummate musician as consummate actor, *histrio*, mime. The music that resulted from this orientation was for Nietzsche, even leaving aside the semantic capacities of leitmotifs, a sustained exercise in what he termed *mimomania*.

We can witness this mimetic penchant time and again in Wagner's music-dramas, especially at those moments not governed by other musical needs (the requirements, that is, of stage-songs, choruses or, in general, remnants of operatic numbers). In her forthcoming book *Mimomania*, Mary Ann Smart seeks just this

[10] With the broaching of Nietzsche arises the question of how much the Council Chamber scene owes its special, Dionysiac character to Boito rather than Verdi. It must be said at the start that Boito kept a certain distance from the project of revising a Piave libretto for a Verdi opera that had not been a success – that had, indeed, by 1880 almost disappeared from the stage. Nevertheless Boito certainly exerted a large influence in the outward conception and shape of the Council Chamber scene, as his correspondence with Verdi makes clear (for the crucial documents see Budden, II, 257–8, also 259–61). Moreover, it is possible that he took a knowingly Nietzschean role in constructing its deeper, Dionysiac resonance. Throughout the 1870s, in the years leading up to his collaboration on *Simon*, Boito was much involved in introducing Wagnerian opera and opinion in Italy. He translated the texts of several Wagnerian works into Italian, including *Rienzi* and, in 1876, *Tristan und Isolde*; in the same year he met Wagner at Bologna. (For the particulars see Piero Nardi, *Vita di Arrigo Boito* [Verona, 1942], *passim*.) The translation of *Tristan* especially suggests that his Wagnerian involvement might well have brought Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* to his attention before the revision of *Simon*. We may surmise, in any case, that Boito's reading of Nietzsche was well advanced by 1894, when he paraphrased *The Case of Wagner* in a letter to his friend Camille Bellaigue (see Raffaello de Rensis, ed., *Lettere di Arrigo Boito* [Rome, 1932], 316–17); and in later notebooks he reveals his knowledge of *The Birth of Tragedy* in particular (Nardi, 687–8). For Boito's possible role in the specifically musical innovations of the curse in *Simon* see n. 14 below.

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sort of 'gestural perspective' on Wagner's operas through illuminating analyses of a scene – the opening scene of *Die Walküre* – and a role – Kundry in *Parsifal*. While in the second of these Smart perceives the ultimate possibility of an 'abstraction' of music from gesture, she makes the important point that Wagner's general tendency to mimicry of bodily motion reverses the practice he called for in *Opera and Drama*. 'Rather than making manifest the meaning of the orchestral melody', Smart writes, 'the sequence of gestures seems to prompt the music, even to dictate something of its structure'.[11]

The reversal Smart discerns is found even in *Tristan*. Anyone who wants to hear just how far the mimomania Nietzsche named penetrated to the heart of what had at first seemed to him a Dionysiac triumph need only listen carefully to any number of important moments in the work: the moment, for example, of Tristan's first approach to Isolde, on the ship in Act I, when the motive these days inappropriately identified with him in fact mimics her leaden staggering to the back of the stage; or the moment of Tristan's approach to Isolde from off stage at the beginning of Act II, where the mounting excitement and accelerating heartbeats of the lovers are reflected in the orchestra (I once saw a production in which Isolde greeted the approaching Tristan by waving a handkerchief faster and faster to the quickening music, thus comically externalizing an inner bodily motion that was, after all, on Wagner's mind too); or – a crucial instance – the drinking of the potion, where the music of the Prelude returns not in its original, abstract (so to speak) form, but in a form we now understand to be *corporeal* and visceral, since it is interspersed with orchestral phrases that correspond to the protagonists' every motion and glance towards one another.

Though there are many instances of such miming of bodily motion in Verdi – think of Cassio getting drunk, of Carlos falling into a swoon of love remembered or rousing himself to rush off to aid the Flemings, of Falstaff flushed with sack – Verdi is no mimomaniac. What strikes one across his late career is not the elaboration of his talent for such mimesis but instead the assertion of a certain *distance* between his orchestral gestures and on-stage bodily motion. This tendency is not ubiquitous, and it certainly exists in the midst of other, countering tendencies. Indeed, the increased variety and precision of Verdi's orchestral usage late in his career led at times directly to the moments of detailed orchestral mimicry I cited just now instead of towards the distance in question. Nevertheless the distance opens out frequently and takes many forms. It is apparent, for instance, in the increased intricacy of orchestral counterpoint supporting the voice, especially at approaches to cadences, evident from *Don Carlos* on (an example: the cadence at 'E tu m'amavi per la mia pietà' in the love duet from *Otello*). It fascinates in the sublimely neutral *parlante* accompaniments that Verdi could devise late in his career (compare the inscrutable, eloquent, somehow slightly maritime music that supports the opening

[11] Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera*, chapter 6, 'Mimomania: Allegory and Embodiment in Wagner's Music Dramas' (Berkeley and Los Angeles, forthcoming, 2003). For my own broader reading of Nietzsche's famous considerations of Wagner, see my *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, 1999), chap. 5.

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conversation of the 1881 *Simon* with the Donizettian conversational gambit, a holdover from the 1857 version, that opens the recognition duet). It manifests itself in those orchestral introductions to scenes and acts in the late operas that set the stage without the Valkyrie-flying, Grail-levitating, Rhine Valley-traversing specificity of Wagnerian orchestral music (for example: the opening of the Council Chamber scene itself, which resists clear semantic references even while it dimly adumbrates the later curse music). And it positively screams in the generalized but anti-mimetic malevolence of the redoubled, trilling brass of Iago's creed.

Verdi's increasing ability from the 1860s on to focus his orchestral forces in this assertive but non-mimetic way culminates in a new musico-dramatic practice: the climactic orchestral outburst, substantially freed from subordination to the voices, that catches in its sweep a crucial moment the drama has reached. This new orchestral practice, because of its climactic nature, conveys not so much a neutral distance, or Smart's abstraction, as a glimmering of transcendence. It brought about in turn a transformation of sorts in Verdi's approach to climactic words themselves – to, that is, the kind of riveting utterance he famously described as the *parola scenica*.

In fact Verdi's several descriptions in letters to librettists of this dramaturgical conception repeatedly, if implicitly, gestured towards transcendence. These 'scenic words' were meant to do more than signify as individual words and phrases: they were to paint a whole tableau, to clarify a whole intrigue. The *parola scenica*, Verdi writes, 'scolpisce e renda [*sic*] netta ed evidente la situazione' [sculpts and makes the situation precise and evident]. Poetry and music themselves, Verdi urged twice in this connection, may have to cede before the theatrical needs of so powerful a word.[12]

Verdi's search for effective *parole sceniche* led him often enough towards simple verbal clarifications of important developments in his plots, towards concentrated utterances that drive the action forward. These could be as poetically pedestrian but dramatically incisive as the 'Non sono una Grimaldi!' Boito gave to Amelia in the midst of the recognition duet, thus sharpening a *parola scenica* that had not been pointed enough in Piave's original. Among examples of this kind of *parola scenica* we might include such utterances as 'Ebben . . . sì . . . t'amo' from *Ballo*, 'Tutto è finito' or 'È morto assassinato il re Duncano!' from *Macbeth*, and 'Ah, siate entrambi voi maledetti!' from *Rigoletto*.

But Verdi also seems to have looked more and more towards another sort of utterance late in his career, a climactic utterance to which, I think, we would be hard pressed to deny the name *parola scenica*. This is a word or phrase that does not clarify the moment-to-moment action so as to push it immediately forward, as does the

[12] For a dossier of the occurrences of the expression 'parola scenica' in Verdi's correspondence see Harold Powers, '*Simon Boccanegra* I.10–12: A Generic-Genetic Analysis of the Council Chamber Scene', *19th-Century Music*, 13 (1989), 101–28, Appendix III. My interpretation in the following paragraphs, admittedly extrapolating further than Powers does from the appearances of this phrase in Verdi's letters, embraces what I see as a deep musico-dramaturgical shift across Verdi's late career rather than the constancy that Powers perceives.

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more common sort, but rather summarizes and culminates the action that has come before. In a larger sense, of course, this culmination, as it does not simply end the opera, stimulates the further action. Its operation in this regard, however, is global rather than local. Its local impact is instead powerfully to brake the action so as to linger at a crucial, even overwhelming nexus. This second kind of *parola scenica* typically emphasizes the transcendent motion, aimed beyond the force of a word or phrase alone, that was always implicit in Verdi's conception; it is a *parola scenica* that surpasses paradoxically the *parola*. It frames the word as avatar of a wordless musical excess that is, after all, the primary locus, metaphorical and otherwise, of transcendence in nineteenth-century aesthetics. To do this, it relies on the independent, non-mimetic force of the late Verdian orchestra.

If, then, 'Non sono una Grimaldi!' is a *parola scenica* of the first kind, propelling the action of the recognition duet, we can see that Verdi and Boito sought in revising this duet to build in also a *parola scenica* of the second sort. It comes at the end of the revised cabaletta, on the words 'Padre!' and 'O figlia!' uttered respectively by daughter and father. It is only in part a function of these words, as they are outstripped by the huge orchestral swell that builds beneath them and finally transcended by the harp apotheosis. It brings the action to a grinding halt – so powerfully that directors from the 1880s on have been tempted simply to cut what follows and end the scene right here – as listeners and protagonists alike linger in an ecstatic realm of renewed filial and paternal love. In describing in his review this moment of orchestral assertiveness Filippo Filippi got it just right: 'Heaven', he wrote, 'seems to open up'.[13]

This novel kind of *parola scenica* reappears in the most famous moment of Otello. Here again the words, in this case 'Un bacio . . . ancora un bacio', cede to the transcendent force of the orchestra. In this instance, of course, Verdi and Boito contrived to make this *parola scenica* not only the culmination of the first act but the last word of the opera as a whole, thereby bringing home the tragedy with a pathos rooted deeply in cruel irony. And thereby, it needs to be added, extending the reach of a transcendent, action-halting orchestral hypostasis across the whole of the opera in a doubled form, first as serene affirmation, later as tragic negation. With the 'bacio' theme Verdi uncovered in his new practice a potential leverage of Archimedean dimensions – not the leverage that enabled the older *parola scenica* to propel the immediate motion of the plot, but one that could move the whole opera, wrenching it out of one orbit and into a new one.

Among the instances of this new sort of *parola scenica*, the curse in *Simon Boccanegra* occupies a special place. Here Verdi discovered the singular force the orchestra

[13] Busch, II, 669. This orchestral swell is, in its revised and greatly enhanced form (if not, obviously, in the more modest version of 1857), reminiscent of Ponchielli's *La gioconda* (1876), as Jay Nicolaisen has suggested (*Italian Opera in Transition* [Ann Arbor, 1980], 39). I disagree, however, with Nicolaisen's choice of the return of the concertato theme to end Act III of *La gioconda* as the moment to compare with Verdi's swell; to my ear the return of the Rosary Theme to conclude the Act I ensemble bears a more striking musical and affective resemblance to the end of Verdi's duet. In any case, in *La gioconda* Nicolaisen recognizes an important anticipation of Verdi's new, transcendent orchestral usage.

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could bring to this new type – here, perhaps, he first discerned for himself the type all told – here, at any rate, he stumbled upon its most powerful, elemental operation. The curse is exemplary because of the unique way its particular conditions mesh with the features of the new *parola scenica*. In this instance, unlike the recognition cabaletta or the 'bacio' theme, the falling away of the human voice in the face of the orchestra is overdetermined. It arises not only out of musical expressive exigencies in the face of a powerful dramatic crux, but also out of the very force – anti-subjective, Dionysiac – that is unleashed. In its doubly occult nature, as it overwhelms and hushes the voices, the curse itself summons the orchestra to speak in a qualitatively new manner.[14]

This new orchestral manner of the curse in *Simon* comforts us with no lyrical shaping or balance; it has nothing of the leitmotivic about it, nothing of the mimetic; it offers no gestures conforming to bodily motions; it completes no thematic recurrence to invest its music with the bounty from some earlier dramatic association. In fact, it offers no meaning as such at all. It is, simply, an excess that rises up – that must rise up, given the transcending of subjective voice at stake – and carries with it both words and drama. Its terror originates in this broaching of a place beyond meaning and suggests that, in learning to curse in 1880, Verdi learned much else he had not so clearly known before.

[14] I return to the question of influences reflected in this moment (see n. 10 above) to treat now of specifically musical influences. Ponchielli's orchestral apotheoses, however influential on Verdi, are not at any deep level anticipations of the curse music. They do not surpass the singing voices in the manner of *Simon*, but are instead climactic restatements of what the voices have already managed to articulate perfectly clearly. Boito himself, on the other hand, contrives something closer to Verdi's curse in the heavenly brass fanfares of the Prologue and Epilogue of *Mefistofele*. Especially at the end of the Epilogue, these seem to overwhelm the words – even words of an angelic choir – in a fashion akin to the curse, if with an orientation inverted from the demonic to the divine. Meanwhile, Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* offers an instance of orchestral ineffability famous in its time, one discussed elsewhere in this issue by Gabriela Cruz ('Aida's Flutes'; see above, 197f.): the melody introducing the final scene, played out beneath an exotic and poisonous African tree.

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