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Otello

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Recommended Citation

Fairtile, Linda B. "Otello." In *The Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia*, edited by Roberta Montemorra Marvin, 317-27. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

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Otello, *dramma lirico* in four acts, libretto by Arrigo BOITO, drawn from William SHAKESPEARE's play *Othello, or The Moor of Venice*. *First performance*: MILAN, TEATRO ALLA SCALA, 5 February 1887. *Impresarios*: Cesare CORTI and Enrico Corti. *Conductor*: Franco FACCIO. *Scenic design*: Carlo FERRARIO. *Costume design*: Alfredo EDEL. *Cast for the premiere*: Otello, a Moor, General in the Venetian army (tenor): Francesco TAMAGNO; Iago, his ensign (baritone): Victor MAUREL; Cassio, his lieutenant (tenor): Giovanni PAROLI; Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman (tenor): Vincenzo FORNARI; Lodovico, ambassador of the Venetian Republic (bass): Francesco NAVARRINI; Montano, predecessor of Otello in the Government of Cyprus (bass): Napoleone LIMONTA; a Herald (bass): Angelo Lagomarsino; Desdemona, wife of Otello (soprano): Romilda PANTALEONI; Emilia, wife of Iago (mezzo-soprano): Ginevra PETROVICH. Soldiers and sailors of the Republic, Venetian ladies and gentlemen, Cypriot men, women, and children; Greek, Dalmatian, and Albanian soldiers; an innkeeper; four inn servers; the people. *Scene*: a seaport in Cyprus. *Period of the action*: the end of the fifteenth century.

Verdi's penultimate opera represents his first new work for the stage after a nearly sixteen-year hiatus. As battles raged over the future of Italian opera—whether it should remain rooted in song or follow foreign trends that assign a greater role to the orchestra—Giulio RICORDI and Boito patiently lured Verdi

back into the fray. Boito's libretto, an ingenious and at times eccentric adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, inspired the composer to a highly personal fusion of tradition and innovation. At its premiere *Otello* was widely hailed as a masterpiece, an emphatic and fundamentally Italian answer to the debate over music and drama. Although it remains both admired and respected, *Otello* tends not to be performed frequently, owing to the difficulty of casting its vocally demanding title role.

1. Plot synopsis
2. Origins, genesis, and performance
3. Performance history
4. Subject and characterization
5. Libretto and music

1. Plot synopsis

Act I. Outside the castle. The opera begins with a furious storm at sea. Cypriots and Venetians gather anxiously on shore to await the ship bearing Otello and his army. As the onlookers pray for their safety ('Dio, fulgor della bufera'), Iago, Otello's ensign, quietly wishes for his commander's demise. The ship is saved, and upon landing Otello triumphantly proclaims victory over the Turks ('Esultate!') before entering the castle. Iago consoles Roderigo, a Venetian nobleman who is hopelessly in love with Otello's new bride, Desdemona. Sensing an ally, Iago reveals to Roderigo his hatred of Otello, as well as his envy of Otello's lieutenant, Cassio. The Cypriots prepare a celebratory bonfire ('Fuoco di gioia'). Amid the rejoicing, Iago strikes up a *BRINDISI* ('Inaffia l'ugola'), knowing that Cassio cannot hold his liquor. The lieutenant quickly becomes inebriated, singing the praises of Desdemona and raising Roderigo's suspicion. As Cassio loses his bearings, his song grows increasingly incoherent. Called to take the watch, he stumbles and is mocked by Roderigo. The two men begin to fight. Attempting to stop them, Montano is wounded, and with Iago's encouragement, a riot ensues. At the height of the chaos, Otello appears and calls for calm. He demands an explanation from Iago, who feigns innocence. Seeing the injured Montano, as well as Desdemona awakened from sleep, Otello angrily demotes Cassio. As the stage clears, Desdemona and Otello sing a sublime *DUET* ('Già nella notte densa') recalling their courtship; three times Otello asks for a kiss as the orchestra intones the '*bacio*' motive. He and Desdemona embrace and walk together toward the castle.

Act II. A room on the ground floor of the castle. Iago and Cassio discuss the latter's recent demotion, and Iago recommends seeking Otello's pardon through Desdemona. After Cassio leaves to speak with her, Iago muses on his warped philosophy ('Credo in un dio crudel'): he is driven by a cruel god who demands evil deeds and promises oblivion in return. As Otello enters, Iago mutters about the unseemliness of Cassio and Desdemona's conversation. Alternately raising doubt and feigning ignorance, Iago plants the seed of suspicion and warns Otello to watch his wife closely. His anger aroused, Otello is subsequently mollified by a *CHORUS* of women, children, and sailors singing Desdemona's praises ('Dove guardi splendono raggi,' known as the 'Homage Chorus'). As they depart, Desdemona approaches her husband to plead on Cassio's behalf. Recalling Iago's warning, Otello questions and then

rejects her. In a quartet ('Dammi la dolce lieta parola della perdona'), Desdemona innocently reassures Otello of her love while he agonizes over its imagined loss. At the same time, Iago forces his wife, Emilia, to give him Desdemona's fallen handkerchief. Left alone, Otello stewes in Iago's poisonous insinuations, nearly throttling him when he returns ('Tu? Indietro! Fuggi!'). Answering Otello's demand for proof of Desdemona's infidelity, Iago first recounts a lurid dream that he claims to have overheard from the sleeping Cassio ('Era la notte') and then reports having seen Desdemona's handkerchief in his hand. Nearly mad with jealousy, Otello swears revenge ('Sì, pel ciel,' a *GIURAMENTO*); Iago kneels beside him and pledges to abet his terrible justice. As the two invoke God's vengeance, the curtain falls.

Act III. The great hall of the castle. A herald announces that the Venetian ambassadors' ship has been sighted. As Iago leaves to find Cassio, Desdemona approaches Otello and pleads once again for the disgraced officer ('Dio ti giocondi, o sposo'). Otello feigns a headache and asks for the handkerchief that he had given her. When she cannot produce it, he dares her to defend her chastity. Terrified, Desdemona begs to be told how she has wronged him. With ironic calm, he apologizes for having mistaken her for the courtesan who is married to Otello. He forces her offstage and returns alone. In a choked voice he laments the dissolution of his marriage ('Dio! Mi potevi scagliar'). Iago returns and instructs Otello to conceal himself while he questions Cassio about his amorous adventures. As Iago and Cassio banter, Otello presumes that they are talking about Desdemona. Cassio produces her handkerchief, which has mysteriously appeared in his house; he and Iago joke as Otello secretly fumes ('Questa è una ragna'). Cassio exits as trumpets announce the landing of the Venetian ambassadors. Otello emerges from his hiding place and, encouraged by Iago, ponders Desdemona's murder; he promotes Iago to captain in gratitude for his advice.

The ambassadors enter and are greeted with a choral welcome ('Viva! Evviva!'). Lodovico presents Otello with a message from the Doge and questions him about Cassio's absence. Iago craftily encourages Desdemona to express sympathy for Cassio, to which Otello responds with a curse. To the astonished onlookers Otello reveals that the Doge has recalled him to Venice and appointed Cassio to govern Cyprus in his place. Devastated, Desdemona approaches her husband, who angrily pushes her to the ground. As the assembled forces react to this outrage in a *concertato* passage ('A terra! . . . sì. . . nel livido fango. . .'), Iago plots, first with Otello and then with Roderigo, to bring about Cassio's murder. Otello orders everyone to leave the hall and collapses in a faint. As offstage voices sing praises to the Lion of Venice, Iago stands in triumph over the fallen Otello and derisively replies, 'Here is your Lion!'

Act IV. Desdemona's bedroom. As Desdemona prepares for bed, she and Emilia discuss Otello's demeanor. Desdemona asks to be buried with her wedding dress. She tells the story of her mother's lovelorn maidservant, Barbara, and recalls the song that she used to sing ('Piangea cantando,' known as the 'Willow Song') [see *STAGE SONG*]. Seized with foreboding, Desdemona bids a dramatic farewell to Emilia and says a prayer (the *PREGHIERA*, 'Ave Maria') before going to bed.

A solo passage for doublebasses marks Otello's silent appearance. In a grim pantomime, he enters, places his sword on the table, and hesitates before extinguishing the light. As he gazes at Desdemona, the 'bacio' motive (from the Act I duet) sounds in the orchestra. He kisses her twice, and on the third kiss she awakens. Otello asks if she has prayed and instructs her to recall any sins still on her conscience. Fresh accusations of infidelity follow, which Desdemona repeatedly denies. She implores Otello to let Cassio speak in her defense, only to be told that he is dead. Knowing that all is lost, Desdemona pleads to live for another hour, another moment. It is too late: Otello smothers her. Emilia knocks at the door, crying that Cassio has killed Roderigo. Entering, she sees the dying Desdemona, who absolves Otello. Otello counters that he killed Desdemona after Iago told him that she had betrayed him with Cassio. Incredulous, Emilia calls for help and then denounces Iago. Montano appears and adds the dying Roderigo's corroboration, but Iago manages to escape. Realizing his tragic error, Otello brandishes his sword and recalls his past glory ('Niun mi tema'). Dropping the weapon, he addresses Desdemona ('E tu, come sei pallida') and then stabs himself with a dagger. Dying, he kisses her three times, as the 'bacio' motive is heard once more.

2. Origins, genesis, and performance

The 1870s were an unsettling time for Italian opera. During the previous decade the cultural elite had become increasingly preoccupied with Wagner's controversial theories about music and drama. With a performance of *Lohengrin* in Bologna in 1871, the ultramontane specter finally materialized, giving ammunition to those who condemned the stale conventions of Italian opera. Other foreign composers were also increasingly heard in Italy's opera houses, leading the younger generation of native-born musicians further from their inherited values and traditions. Verdi himself was not immune to this influence, having absorbed important lessons from his encounters with French grand opera. Anxiety about Italy's place in the musical world was shaking the foundations of the nation's cultural identity.

After the premiere of *AIDA* in 1871, Verdi seemed to turn his back on dramatic composition. In those years his views on the future of Italian music had grown increasingly negative, soured by accusations that he was, on the one hand, hopelessly old-fashioned and, on the other, a traitorous convert to Wagnerism. Perhaps the greatest blow had come when the twenty-one-year-old Boito (after collaborating with Verdi on *INNO DELLE NAZIONI*) recited (and published) an ode appealing for a savior to cleanse the soiled altar of art. Tired of defending the traditions that had nurtured him—and which he himself had also defied—Verdi turned to non-dramatic genres, composing his *STRING QUARTET* in 1873 and *MESSA DA REQUIEM* in 1874. And yet Giulio Ricordi, as shrewd about composers' psyches as he was about their earning potential, believed that Boito, now middle-aged and mellowed, could draw Verdi out of his self-imposed exile.

The *Otello* project was set in motion in June 1879. Ricordi later recalled steering a dinner conversation toward Shakespeare and Boito, with Verdi demonstrating interest and suspicion in equal measure. When Boito visited the next day, bringing plans for a libretto, Verdi's reaction was cool. He

encouraged the poet to proceed, but refused to commit himself to the final product. Slowed by illness and self-doubt, Boito eventually dispatched a draft *Otello* libretto to Ricordi, who passed it on to the composer. After reading the libretto, Verdi purchased it from Boito, only to set it aside with no apparent plan for its use.

In fact, the subject remained very much on his mind. When the painter Domenico MORELLI [III] sent a sketch from *King Lear* [see *RE LEAR*], Verdi asked him next to depict a scene from *Othello*. A few months later Verdi and Boito exchanged letters about the libretto. These early missives reveal competing visions for the conclusion of the third act, which would continue to trouble the composer even after the opera's premiere. While Verdi's suggestions for this scene were highly conventional—a *concertato* followed by a surprise invasion of Cyprus that would enable Otello to recapture his lost glory—Boito's plan depended on maintaining an ever-increasing tension that would drive the protagonist to the brink of madness. The compromise suggested by Boito, juxtaposing Otello's fainting spell with the cheers of the offstage chorus, earned Verdi's admiration but left the question of the *concertato* unresolved.

Verdi may have begun planning the music of *Otello* as early as February 1880, but his work on the score was sporadic. By the autumn he and Boito were instead absorbed in the revision of *SIMON BOCCANEGRA* for a new production at the Teatro alla Scala. This venture enabled them to test their collaboration and allowed Verdi to ease back into theatrical composition after a decade's hiatus. Further work on the troublesome Act III *concertato* followed, with Boito struggling to create a set piece containing both lyrical and dramatic elements. Pleased with the result, Verdi set about revising another of his completed operas, *DON CARLOS*, for the Teatro alla Scala.

By early 1884 the composition of *Otello* began in earnest, but Verdi abruptly ceased work after a newspaper erroneously reported that Boito had expressed regret over not setting the libretto to music himself. Feeling betrayed and humiliated, Verdi offered to renounce all claims on *Otello*. After repeated apologies from Boito, as well as a gift in the form of a new 'Credo' text for Iago, Verdi grudgingly agreed to continue with the opera. He resumed composing in December 1884, drafting the Act II quartet and seeking additional revisions to the libretto, including a new text for the Act IV 'Willow Song' and a shortening of the final scene. By the following autumn he had completed Act IV and immediately began orchestrating it. Over the next several months he orchestrated the remainder of the opera while reworking several passages in Act I. At the end of August 1885 Verdi sent the autograph of Act IV to Giulio Ricordi; Acts I and III and half of Act II followed in a matter of weeks.

Word of Verdi's first new opera in nearly a decade could hardly be kept quiet for long. Hopeful singers besieged the composer even before he had drafted the final act. It was taken for granted that the Teatro alla Scala would host the premiere, with Boito's great friend, Faccio, as conductor. Among the performers to approach Verdi were the French baritone Maurel, who reminded the composer that he had already been promised the role of Iago, and the leading *tenore di forza*, Tamagno. While Verdi did not regret choosing the resourceful Maurel, he remained skeptical about Tamagno whose muscular voice and shaky musicianship he feared would ruin Otello's lyrical moments.

The role of Desdemona was the most difficult to cast. Verdi reluctantly accepted Pantaleoni, who was romantically involved with Faccio, and worked diligently with her to soften her sometimes steely tone. During this time he altered the refrain of the 'Willow Song' and transposed the quartet down a semitone for her benefit. On 1 November 1886 Verdi completed the orchestration of Act II, writing to Boito, 'All honor to us! (and to *Him!!*)' (most likely referring to Shakespeare). He was not, however, ready to pronounce the opera finished. While correcting proofs of the piano-vocal score, and then while rehearsing the opera, Verdi made small adjustments to the vocal parts and a significant change to the *Otello-Iago* duet that closes Act II.

Verdi gave extraordinary attention to the scenery, costumes, and props for *Otello*, both before and after its premiere. He rejected sketches of African and Turkish dress for the protagonist and repeatedly complained about the distracting opulence of Desdemona's gowns. The staging [see also *STAGING AND STAGE DIRECTORS*] so preoccupied him that he frequently demonstrated his wishes during rehearsals. Eager to document the composer's intentions, Giulio Ricordi prepared a highly detailed *DISPOSIZIONE SCENICA* intended to prescribe virtually every aspect of future productions. Verdi's anxiety about preparations for the first performance led to a one-week postponement of the opening night. Finally, on 5 February 1887, *Otello* received its long-awaited premiere.

Critics were virtually unanimous in their enthusiasm for the new opera. Many proclaimed the synthesis of music and drama in *Otello* superior to Wagner's efforts. Filippo FILIPPI swore that he had never seen anything like the fourth act, 'even in the legitimate theater, which is closer to reality.' Verdi's score received fervent praise: describing the Act I duet for *Otello* and Desdemona, Camille BELLAIGUE remarked that 'nothing more beautiful has been written in the language of love.' A few writers lamented the passing of the 'old' Verdi, with his hummable tunes and visceral emotions, but for most, *Otello* represented the beacon that would lead Italy out of the musical wilderness and back to world dominance.

Verdi made two additional minor changes to the *Otello* score in the weeks following its premiere. After twenty-five performances, the Teatro alla Scala company moved on to ROME, with Adalgisa GABBI replacing an exhausted Pantaleoni. In the next several months *Otello* made the rounds of Italy's principal theaters. While Tamagno sang in many of these performances, to enormous public acclaim, Verdi preferred the more versatile Franco CARDINALI. Although other tenors such as Giovanni Battista De Negri and Jean de RESZKE found success as *Otello*, Tamagno owned the role for the remainder of his career. He recorded a few excerpts from the opera before 1905, after his health had declined considerably. Maurel, too, committed portions of *Iago's* music to record near the end of his career.

3. Performance history

The first foreign performance of *Otello*, in a pirated edition, took place in Mexico City in November 1887. The initial legitimate performance outside Italy came five months later, when Cleofonte Campanini led a touring production in the UNITED STATES. Germany first saw *Otello* in 1888, and a revival of the Teatro alla Scala production, minus Pantaleoni, traveled to LONDON in 1889.

More significant for Verdi was the opera's French debut (as *Othello* in a translation by Camille DU LOCLE and Boito), on 12 October 1894, which occasioned two non-definitive revisions. In accordance with Parisian custom, he and Boito had long planned to insert the obligatory ballet into Act II, later deciding that Act III was a more suitable location. Verdi, who objected to the 'monstrosity' of dance added solely for entertainment's sake, found composing the orientalist music an obnoxious chore. [See also DANCE MUSIC AND BALLETT MUSIC.] At this time he also revised the problematic Act III *concertato*, initially to an Italian text, to draw attention to Iago's dramatically essential plotting of Desdemona's and Cassio's murders. This new, shorter *concertato* remains a curiosity and, like the ballet music, does not appear in most Italian editions of the score.

Otello's performance history has always hinged on the availability of tenors able to meet the unusual vocal demands of its title role. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Italian performances of this opera were few, perhaps owing to the enormous shadow cast by Tamagno. The Teatro alla Scala did not present *Otello* with any frequency until Arturo Toscanini imported a French tenor, Antonin Trantoul, in 1927. In German-speaking countries tenors apparently felt no such trepidation: Leo Slezak, Helge Roswänge, and Max Lorenz all sang *Otello* throughout their careers. At the time of his death, Enrico Caruso was planning to attempt the role for the first time at New York's Metropolitan Opera. Instead, *Otello* remained absent from the company's repertory until Giovanni Martinelli assumed the title role in 1937.

In subsequent decades, *Otello* again became closely associated with individual singers. The 1950s and 1960s were dominated by Mario Del Monaco, a dramatic tenor who so identified with *Otello* that he was buried in his costume. When Plácido Domingo assumed the role in 1975, his more lyrical interpretation set the standard. Since Domingo's final performance of *Otello* in 2001, casting the opera has become more complicated. Although it is largely unacceptable for a white actor to portray Shakespeare's Othello in blackface, the practice is still prevalent in opera, as a consequence of the scarcity of singers of any race who are capable of performing *Otello*. Recently, however, some Caucasian tenors have sung the role without 'blacking up,' and in 2009 Ronald Samm became the first black *Otello* to perform, in a professional British production. [See also SINGERS.]

4. Subject and characterization

When Ricordi introduced Shakespeare's name into the fateful dinner conversation of June 1879, he knowingly invoked a figure with special resonance. Most Italians of Verdi's generation accepted VOLTAIRE'S characterization of Shakespeare as a 'drunken savage,' a writer ignorant of the classical unities and undisciplined in his blending of comedy and tragedy. The first reasonably authentic production of one of the Bard's plays in Italy, a Milanese performance of *Othello* in 1842, was drowned out by catcalls. Against this background, Verdi's lifelong admiration for Shakespeare represented a bold stance. But if Italians were reluctant to accept Shakespearean works at full strength, they had less difficulty warming to musical compositions derived from them. One of the most popular operatic Shakespeare settings was Rossini's *Otello* (1816),

to a libretto by Francesco Maria Berio, Marchese di Salsa, which only loosely followed the play. In Giuseppina STREPPONI's recollection, both Berio's libretto and Rossini's music came under criticism during the 1879 dinner conversation, but all present agreed that the sublime 'Gondolier's Song' would intimidate any future composer considering an opera on this subject.

Although Shakespeare's *Othello* is the sole literary source for Boito's text, the librettist and the composer studied several editions of the play. Verdi probably consulted the Italian translations by Andrea MAFFEI and Carlo Rusconi that resided, throughout his life, in a bookcase near his bed. Boito, who could read some English, owned and annotated three editions of *Othello* in the original language. His principal sources, however, were François-Victor HUGO's French translation, of which he extensively marked three copies, and the Italian translations by Maffei and Rusconi. The widely published lectures of August Wilhelm Schlegel were included in most Italian editions of Shakespeare's works. Concerning *Othello*, in particular, Schlegel emphasized extremes of character—Othello as savage, Desdemona as saint, Iago as demon—that call to mind George Bernard Shaw's well-worn description of the play as a tragedy written in the form of an Italian opera.

In his introduction to the opera's *disposizione scenica*, Boito identified the turning point of the drama as Iago's articulation of the word 'jealousy.' Before this moment, Otello is almost godlike, as he appears to calm both the storm at sea and the riot on shore. Boito's decision to eliminate Shakespeare's opening act, moving its account of Otello and Desdemona's courtship into a newly created love duet, enabled Verdi to focus on events in Cyprus while still retaining a vital manifestation of Otello's fleeting happiness. After he is inoculated with Iago's poison, Otello's psychological ruin proceeds at a frightening pace, slowed only by obstacles such as the 'Homage Chorus,' which Verdi and Boito intentionally placed in its path. The character of Otello's music changes over the course of the opera: the long, lyrical phrases of the love duet are replaced by increasingly broken declamation that exploits the extremes of his vocal range.

Writing to Boito, Verdi described Desdemona as 'not a woman but a type,' not merely good but also willing to sacrifice herself for another's happiness. He expressed this selfless purity in musical terms through a graceful lyricism whose symmetry contrasts with both Iago's short and irregular phrasing and Otello's unpredictable outbursts. Verdi's doubts about Pantaleoni's suitability for this role centered on her reputation as a 'passionate, ardent, violent' interpreter, seemingly at odds with his ideal Desdemona. Boito, in the *disposizione scenica*, emphasizes the simplicity of her character and bearing, repeatedly cautioning against excesses of movement and facial expression.

Boito's artistic philosophy is most clearly manifest in the character of Iago, whose ironic pose, twisted syntax, and grotesque imagery evoke the *SCAPigliatura*, an artistic movement that he had helped to launch in the 1860s. While both Shakespeare's and Boito's villains reveal multiple motives for their destructive behavior, only the latter invokes the supernatural. The operatic Iago's bizarre 'Credo' mocks honest men and dismisses heaven—according to the *disposizione scenica*—with a nihilistic shrug. Iago articulates this belief in private; to others, as Boito cautioned, he must appear 'jovial and open and

almost good-natured.' Verdi's music captures this dual nature, surrounding Iago by turns with both slippery chromaticism and prominent passages in the 'neutral' key of C major. His observation that, except for a few phrases, the role could be sung entirely at half voice reveals a strikingly modern interpretation.

5. Libretto and music

Boito's approach to adapting *Othello* for the operatic stage was colored by his own artistic predilections. While he tempered his accustomed literary excesses in deference to Verdi's more direct sensibilities, he nonetheless strove to inspire the composer with novelty and flexibility. Rather than a progression of formal set pieces—a convention that Verdi had already stretched to the breaking point—Boito offered unusual arrangements of rhymed and unrhymed verse that more naturally sculpt the highpoints of Shakespeare's drama.

In the spirit of tradition, Boito employed unrhymed *quinari*, *settenari*, and *endecasillabi*—a variant of the customary *VERSI SCIOLTI*—in low-key, conversational passages. But a substantial part of the *Otello* libretto occupies a middle ground between this distinctive brand of *versi sciolti* and the *VERSI LIRICI* that characterize full-blown set pieces. Unpredictable arrangements of rhymed *quinari*, *settenari*, and *endecasillabi*—'rhymed scena' verse—often surround formal poetic stanzas, suggesting a continuous ebb and flow of lyricism. [See POETIC SCANSION, ITALIAN.]

Boito's use of actual *versi lirici* in *Otello* is likewise atypical, if occasionally self-indulgent. His reliance on longer poetic meters invited the sort of fluid text setting that Verdi had absorbed from French opera. At times Boito's pursuit of originality has a clear motivation: he justified employing an unusual form of *senario* verse in the 'Homage Chorus' by explaining to Verdi that it could be sung *simultaneously with an adjacent stanza in a different poetic meter*. But it is difficult to credit anything other than *scapigliato* eccentricity for the obscure classical meters that he sprinkled throughout the libretto.

In a strikingly realistic vein, Boito set the opera's most dramatic moment, Otello's murder of Desdemona, entirely in unrhymed *endecasillabi*. The long lines of text are repeatedly broken and shared between the two characters, producing a suppleness that approaches natural speech. Verdi recognized the musical challenge inherent in this arrangement, admitting that he struggled 'to avoid too many recitatives, and to find some rhythm, some phrases for so many unrhymed and broken-up verses.' At the same time, he acknowledged that Boito's unorthodox approach was the only acceptable solution, demonstrating how far his dramaturgy had evolved over forty years of operatic composition.

Otello represents a highly sophisticated adaptation of a genre, the *dramma lirico*, that Verdi employed throughout his career. Its four continuous acts include both set pieces adhering to varying degrees of convention and freely structured passages organized around orchestral motives. In one sense, Verdi's employment of set pieces in *Otello* can be seen as a victory for tradition, most notably in his stubborn insistence on a *concertato* for Act III despite its inevitable chilling effect on the drama. At the same time, the particular

location of these set pieces allows them to function as conscious markers of nostalgia in an otherwise forward-looking score.

The originality of *Otello's* music is evident from its opening sonority, a startling eleventh chord seemingly without harmonic context. The ensuing pages are violent and tonally disorienting, a musical foreshadowing of the protagonist's coming emotional torment. The unusually large orchestra plays an unprecedented role in *Otello*, nowhere more vividly than in the thematic transformations that propel the wildly thrashing storm. Throughout his career Verdi stretched the boundaries of convention to serve the drama, but he also recognized that familiar structures provide respite when the drama becomes overwhelming. In the midst of the chaos comes 'Dio, fulgor della bufera,' a symmetrical and tonally unremarkable choral prayer that offers the Cypriots spiritual refuge. *Otello* contains other such moments where convention provides a release: the Act II 'Homage Chorus' momentarily slows Otello's rush to irrationality; the sprightly Act III trio, 'Questa è una ragna,' adds a moment of lightness in the midst of his debasement; and, despite Iago's background plotting, the Act III *concertato* is ultimately heard as a sympathetic response to Desdemona's suffering.

Verdi's reinterpretations of conventional set pieces often blend lyricism and dramatic development to such a degree that their structural outlines pass unnoticed. The Act II quartet unfolds in the context of continuous orchestral activity, from the final phrase of the 'Homage Chorus' through a dialogue for Desdemona and Otello that overlaps with the quartet proper. As Desdemona and Otello pour out their emotions in long phrases, Emilia and Iago battle over Desdemona's fallen handkerchief in rapid declamation. After Iago snatches the handkerchief from his wife, a decisive action that enables the opera's tragic conclusion, the character of the quartet is transformed in a lyrical groundswell. This scene, like so many in *Otello*, dissolves into the next one by means of an expanded tonal palette that avoids formal closure.

Many sections of *Otello* defy traditional analysis, even as they appear to contain vestiges of older operatic forms or loosely linked chains of recognizable structures. The love duet that closes Act I is justly celebrated as a new paradigm of lyrical dialogue, virtually devoid of unison singing. Its central section, borrowed from Othello's address to the Venetian senate in Shakespeare's Act I, is an extended, shared memory. Verdi sets each stanza to new and distinctive music, repeating just a single phrase, Boito's version of 'She lov'd me for the dangers I had passed, And I lov'd her that she did pity them.' The climax of the duet is only secondarily vocal: it is the orchestra's presentation of the '*bacio*' motive that conveys Otello and Desdemona's love, and that will recur with such poignancy at the opera's conclusion.

With the impetus of the operatic culture wars and the inspiration of Boito's libretto, Verdi managed to embrace modernity without betraying his past. *Otello's* influence on Italian opera is perhaps not direct: the generation of Puccini, Mascagni, and Giordano owes as much to foreign models as to Verdi's final works. But by expanding his compositional vocabulary to include not only formal set pieces—at times considerably reinterpreted—but also free-form dialogues and thematic development, Verdi changed expectations for Italian musical drama. *Otello's* profound emotional expression and fluid

dramatic pacing make it the rare Shakespearean opera that is worthy of its literary source.

LINDA B. FAIRTILE

Budden; Busch (1988); *CVB*; Fairtile (1996); Giger (2008); Hepokoski (1987); Hepokoski and Viale Ferrero (1990)