Tonal Identity in Simon Boccanegra

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Tonal Identity in Simon Boccanegra

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It was Heinrich Schenker's contention that a musical work could be properly presented only if the performer understood the composer's concept, and had a perception of the piece as a whole. Schenker was also one of the first to consider the study of autographs and first editions an essential prerequisite for the preparation of analytic performing editions. These ideas are, I think, especially relevant to Verdi studies.

This paper concerns Verdi's revisions for 1881 of the 1857 Simon Boccanegra from a Schenkerian perspective.\(^1\) A comparison of specific foreground and middleground events reveals significant elements of Verdi's style, and suggests possible reasons for the revisions.

Regardless of the nature or size of a work, Schenkerian thought acknowledges the requisite of repetition as the one crucial imperative for thematic content.\(^2\) In this paper, the concept of 'concealed repetition' (verborgene Wiederholung), the uncovering of a non-obvious repetition through structural analysis, has proven a rewarding analytical tool in studying the revisions, and has led to exciting conclusions. As Verdi revised he moved towards greater thematic unity and more meaningful expression of the drama.

The story of Simon Boccanegra includes two important characters who undergo an actual or perceived change of identity. Accordingly, my analytical

\(^1\)Since the autograph of Simon Boccanegra was not available, the following printed materials preserved on microfilm at the Verdi Archive at New York University were consulted: Vocal score, Paris, Escudier (L.E. 1720) ca. 1857, henceforth pvES\(^57\); vocal score, Milan et al, Ricordi (47372) 1881, henceforth pvRI\(^81\); a printed orchestral score of the revised version, Milan, Ricordi (P.R. 152); libretto, Venice 1857; libretto, Milan 1881.

procedure led to a concept which I refer to as 'tonal identity'. I will demonstrate one particular relationship, Verdi's use of F-sharp as a tonality, a consonant tone within a harmony, and an enharmonic entity, as the basis of a conceptual tonal identity.\(^3\)

In the Prologue, Simon's first personal reference, originally in G-sharp in 1857, is altered to F-sharp in 1881:

**Example 1**

a. pvES\(^57\) p.7  b. pvRI\(^81\) p.5

Entering the stage from his palace, Fiesco bids farewell to his daughter, Maria, who had just died:

A te l'estremo addio, palagio altero,
Freddo sepolcro dell'angiolo mio!...
Ne a proteggierti io val-si!!!... Oh maledetto!...
E tu Vergin, soffristi

Here B minor is associated with Maria, and D major with the Virgin. The common tone F-sharp is essential, as is the common name (Example 2). The central relationship is strengthened as Fiesco then laments in F-sharp minor, closing with a call for her prayer, 'Prega, Maria, per me', in the major (Example 3).

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\(^3\)There is a similarity between the present author's term 'tonal identity' and the concept 'tonal sonority' of Pierluigi Petrobelli, "Per un'esegesi della struttura
When Simon seeks Maria in the Prologue, F-sharp is the structurally prominent tone, and the linear thirds seemingly echo the three syllables of 'Maria' (Example 4). Verdi chose D major for Simon's approach to her corpse, but as Simon realizes Maria's fate, F-sharp is dramatically altered to F-natural (Example 5). This also prepares for the diminished seventh which leads to the final key of the Prologue, F major.

(Copenhagen, 1974), reprinted in Verdi Bollettino IX (Parma, 1982). (Editor's note).
Simon: "Suona ogni labbro il mio nome. O Maria, forse in breve potrai dirmi tuo sposo!..."

Example 4
pvR181 p.28 mm.1-10

Amelia's first cantabile, "Come in quest'ora bruna," is filled with reflections and reminiscences. Within this piece in E-flat major, one phrase moves through the remote D major. Initially set to the text, "Come s'unisce, o luna, all'onda il tuo chiaror!", its significance becomes clear in the reprise:

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Il tetto disadorno
Non obliai per te...
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Here Amelia, (whose real name is Maria), recollects the humble dwelling of her childhood. Verdi's use of D major is a musical reference which recalls her identity as the daughter of the deceased Maria.
Example 6
pvR61 pp.50-51 mm.2-9
Amelia: "Come in quest’ora bruna"

In the Council Chamber scene, Verdi proceeds from E-flat minor to the enharmonic relative major, F-sharp, first perceived as G-flat (pvR61 p.132). By notating this passage in F-sharp, Verdi prepares for Amelia’s entrance and the "Pace" theme.

Example 7
pvR61 pp.136-137
Amelia: "Pace" theme

Before the duet in F-sharp minor, "Parla in tuo cor virgineo," Verdi made an interesting revision (Example 8). In 1881, the earlier introduction of F-sharp than previously not only allows a smoother transition to the duet, but in accord with Amelia’s secret, "concedi, che il segreto non aprasi ancor," supports the dramatic implication of her tonal identity.
Example 8
Amelia: "Concedi,
Che il segreto non aprasi ancor."

a. pvES^57 p. 173

b. pvRt^81 p. 169

From this point on, the enharmonic relationship of F-sharp and G-flat plays a fascinating role in relation to the changing perceptions of the characters' true identities. In Act II, Amelia, alone with her father, tells of her love for Simon's enemy, Gabriel Adorno. Upon reconciliation of their differences, the Doge continues in the key of G-flat. But when Amelia introspectively remarks: "(Gran Dio! come salvarlo?)", Verdi notates her part in the enharmonic F-sharp.

Example 9
pvES^57 p. 183
Gabriel is about to take revenge on the already poisoned Simon when Amelia interrupts him to reveal that Simon is her father. With this revelation the enharmonic shift recurs, but this time from the note F-sharp to G-flat (Example 10). This passage is also noteworthy in that it demonstrates the interpolation of another chord between the $\frac{6}{4}$ and its resolution, in this case an augmented 6th. I find this to be a recurring stylistic feature in Verdi's works. Furthermore, it shows the neighbor-note relationship B-flat-C-flat-B-flat, which is the principal design element for Gabriel's following aria 'Perdon, perdon Amelia' (Example 11). The $5-b5-5$ motive is an important unifying factor in Simon Boccanegra.\(^4\)

Example 10  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Gabriel: "Suo padre sei tu!"} \\
\end{array}
\]

Example 11  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Gabriel: "Perdon, perdon Amelia"} \\
\end{array}
\]

In the revised opening of Act III, the $5-b5-5$ motive is again prominent, and since it is also the last strain to be heard at the very close of the opera, thereby frames the final act.

\(^4\)In an otherwise valuable article, Edward T. Cone "On the Road to Otello," Studi Verdi I (1982), places emphasis on
The anticipation of the bVI (G-flat) in Gabriel's aria in 1857 is much less effective than the revision which dramatically delays the arrival of this significant chord.5

As the plot unfolds, Fiesco, disguised since the Prologue as Andrea, is alone with the dying Doge. When Simon recognizes Fiesco, the enharmonic shift is evident:

the half-step relationship in Simon Boccanegra often without recognizing the larger function of these motives as neighbor-notes.

5 In "Die beide Boccanegra Fassungen und der Beginn von Verdis Spätwerk," Analecta Musicologica I (1963), Wolfgang Osthoff concludes that Verdi
Even when Simon tells Fiesco of the tragic irony that Amelia Grimaldi is really his own granddaughter, Maria, (the original non-perception from which the plot evolved), the F-sharp is appropriately present in the context of D major. The vocal line is improved in the revision, with a gradual ascent from an inner voice to the climax on E, and the deletion of the quarter-rest for a completely continuous flow. Here the changes in the bass line again seem more dramatic, especially the replacement of iv with V of vi (Example 15).

Example 15
a. pvEs 57 p. 224

changes melody, harmony, and rhythm, but essentially keeps the same bass line. However, the most interesting points of revision occur where Verdi changes the bass line, as here.
With his dying words, Simon addresses Fiesco on F-sharp, "Tu Fiesco, compl il mio voler!" (p.245), and finally calls to Amelia by her true name, Maria.

These observations stem from a larger study of Verdi's revisionary procedure, where it has proven equally fascinating to observe both what Verdi chose to emend, and what he chose not to revise, and how from the two, he wove a stronger, more dramatic, and more coherent synthesis. The primary goal of music is achieved in its performance, yet through analysis we may arrive at a deeper perception of Verdi's unique style, his growth, and his compositional process. This may, in turn, lead to more meaningful performances.