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# How Verdi's Serious Operas End

## **Keywords**

Giuseppe Verdi, opera

## How Verdi's Serious Operas End<sup>1</sup>

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*"Dicono che quest'opera [Il trovatore] sia troppo triste e che vi siano troppe morti; ma infine nella vita non è tutto morte?"*

(Letter to Countess Maffei, 29 January 1853)<sup>2</sup>

As is well known, virtually all of Verdi's serious operas end with the death of one or more of the three principal characters (i.e., soprano, tenor, baritone, or, if there is no baritone, bass).<sup>3</sup> It seems not to have been observed, however, that early in his career -- by 1848 -- Verdi had worked out his own preferred strategy for these final death scenes, a strategy which he then followed quite consistently, except in the few cases when the premises of the drama made it inappropriate to do so.

First let us identify the "victim" -- the principal character who dies. In his first nine serious operas -- from *Oberto* (1839) through *Macbeth* (1847) -- the typical victim is a male (usually baritone or bass), and a warrior or political leader. (The voice types of the victims are shown in the Table on page 10). The two soprano victims are, significantly, as much political and military leaders as lovers -- Abigail enters with a sword in hand, and Giovanna d'Arco, in her entrance aria, prays for one. But from *I masnadieri* (1847) on, when Verdi turns primarily to plots revolving around sexual jealousy,<sup>4</sup> the victim is far more often the soprano, now weaponless and assigned a role defined primarily by her relationship to the male principals (e.g., the tenor's lover, the baritone's daughter).

Just as important as the identity of the victim is the placement of his or her death within the musical structure. In this respect *Oberto*, Verdi's first opera, stands alone (Table, Group I). Having learned that her father has been killed in an off-stage duel, the soprano expresses her grief in a two-part aria, with slow movement and cabaletta -- a "Scena e Rondo Finale", as Verdi labels it in his autograph score.<sup>5</sup> This is Verdi's first and last rondo finale, a popular device in Italian opera of the preceding decades, but rather old-fashioned by the 1840's.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the ending of *Oberto* is unusual in that Verdi places the musical set piece -- here expressing the soprano's grief -- after the victim dies.

Verdi adopted a variety of approaches in the works following *Oberto* in the early 1840s, as we shall see. But if Verdi had composed (or revised) *Oberto*

in the mid- or late- 1840's it is highly likely that he would have concluded the work with a death scene with mourners, where the final set piece incorporates the victim's death rather than following it. A probable scenario: (1) Oberto would appear mortally wounded after the duel; (2) in an aria or an ensemble, he would die amidst the laments of the other characters, after which (3) a brief closing section would bring down the curtain. Let us consider one-by-one the three stages in these thirteen death scenes with mourners (Group II).

The initial stage prepares the death scene, either by inflicting the mortal wound, or by announcing that the designated victim is dying from poison or -- in *La traviata* -- disease.<sup>7</sup> That the dying character must sing in the next stage -- an aria or ensemble -- encourages the use of poison and daggers as causes of death, as opposed to decapitation or fatal leaps into gorges (both of which are "allowable" causes of death in the final stage). Furthermore, merely pronouncing sentence of execution is not sufficient to trigger the set piece -- the blow must actually have been struck, the fatal draught quaffed. That is, Verdi never adopted the dramatic situation found in *Anna Bolena*, *Il pirata*, and countless other operas -- where the soprano's final set piece is motivated by the imminent execution of either the soprano herself or her lover.

The second stage is a slow set piece, in which the victim dies, surrounded by grieving friends (usually including his or her lover, who may also be dying), relatives, and even former enemies.<sup>8</sup> These movements are consolatory, and the death agony is almost never disturbed by any expression of rancor or gloating -- the murder or suicide has made amends for all past wrongs. In *Alzira* and *Un ballo in maschera* the dying ruler pardons his assassin, who in turn repents and is thereby allowed to participate in the general mourning. If there are characters unwilling to forgive, they will be excluded from the ensemble or at least assigned subordinate roles.<sup>9</sup> For example, in *La forza del destino* the fanatically vengeful Carlo dies offstage immediately after

## TABLE - Endings with the Death of a Principal Character: A Typology

Note: The voice type of the victim(s) follows the title and date of the premiere of the opera; deaths occur on stage unless otherwise specified.

I. Set piece placed after the victim's death (a *rondò finale*):

*Oberto* (1839) -- Bass (offstage)

## II. Death scene with mourners

## A. Arias:

*I due Foscari* (1844) -- Baritone

*Giovanna d'Arco* (1845) -- Soprano

*Alzira* (1845) -- Baritone

## B. Ensembles:

\**Il corsaro* (1848) -- Soprano (then Tenor)

*La battaglia di Legnano* (1849) -- Tenor

\**Luisa Miller* (1849) -- Soprano (then Tenor)

\**Rigoletto* (1851) -- Soprano

\**Il trovatore* (1853)<sup>1</sup> -- Soprano (then Tenor)

\**La traviata* (1853) -- Soprano

*Simon Boccanegra* I, II (1857, 1881) -- Baritone

\**Un ballo in maschera* (1859) -- Tenor

*La forza del destino* II (1869) -- Soprano<sup>2</sup>

*Aida* (1871) -- Soprano and Tenor<sup>3</sup>

## C. Sui generis:

*La forza del destino* I (1862) -- Soprano (then Tenor)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Andante set piece (major mode throughout or minor mode changing to major), followed by a final allegro section in minor mode.



## III. Victory hymn:

<i>Nabucco</i> as usually performed (1842)	-- Soprano (offstage)
<i>I lombardi</i> (1843)	-- Bass
<i>Jèrusalem</i> (1847)	-- Bass
<i>Macbeth</i> II (1865)	-- Baritone (offstage) <sup>5</sup>

## IV. Brief, declamatory death scene of a wrongdoer:

<i>Nabucco</i> as written (1842)	-- Soprano
<i>Macbeth</i> I (1847)	-- Baritone <sup>5</sup>
<i>Otello</i> (1887)	-- Tenor <sup>5</sup>

## V. "Conflict ensemble", followed by death of victim:

<i>Ernani</i> (1844)	-- Tenor
<i>Attila</i> (1846)	-- Bass
<i>I masnadieri</i> (1847)	-- Soprano

## Notes for Table

1. In *Le trouvère*, the 1857 revision for Paris, a reprise of the "Miserere" is sandwiched in between the soprano's death and the final allegro section.
2. Preceded by the offstage death of the baritone.
3. The tenor dies shortly after the soprano, without the musical articulation found in the other endings with two or more deaths.
4. After the offstage death of the baritone there is a brief declamatory solo for the death of the soprano, followed by a lengthy scene with declamatory solo and chorus for the suicide of the tenor.
5. Preceded by the death of the soprano.

stabbing his sister. And during Leonora's death agony in *Il trovatore* the Count remains in the background -- musically as well as scenically -- until her death.

The death agony is public -- with prominent

chorus -- in the case of all of the men and, significantly, Giovanna d'Arco. The remaining sopranos -- even when their tenor lovers die with them -- have a more intimate death, with little or, usually, no choral participation.

Although Verdi immediately rejected the two-part *rondò* finale, in the three operas in Group II A -- all of them from 1844-45 -- Verdi sets the death scene as an aria.<sup>10</sup> In the two works from 1845, he limits the aria to a single slow movement. However, Verdi's most characteristic solution is to set the final death scene as an ensemble (Group II B). With *Il corsaro* (1848) he created the model that he would follow again and again in later operas -- for local details as well as large-scale structure.

In nine of these ten works, the ensemble consists of a slow movement only (typically marked "andante" or "andante sostenuto"), either in the major mode throughout or, slightly more common, arriving there relatively soon after beginning in the minor mode.<sup>11</sup>

From *Macbeth* I (1847) on, almost all death scenes are written in keys with at least three flats.<sup>12</sup> This may be difficult to explain, but it is surely no coincidence; after 1847 final scenes with different dramatic situations are usually set in other keys (as in *Stiffelio*, *La forza del destino* I, *Les Vêpres siciliennes*, *Macbeth* II, and *Falstaff*).<sup>13</sup>

The end of the set piece usually coincides with the principal victim's death.<sup>14</sup> In all but the last two works in this group (*La forza del destino* II and *Aida*) there follows a brief third and final stage. In *La battaglia di Legnano* and *Un ballo in maschera* there is no further dramatic action after the death of the victim, and the music reflects this by holding firm to the tonic chord that concluded the set piece.<sup>15</sup> Usually, however, there is a further dramatic event, which unfolds within a single cadence: perhaps the death of a second principal character, the tenor (as in *Il corsaro*, *Luisa Miller*, *Il trovatore*). There may be a final act of revenge (as in *Luisa Miller*, where Rodolfo kills Wurm before dying), the transference of political power (in *Simon Boccanegra*), or a revelation embodied in a "punch line" ("La maledizione!" or "Egli era tuo fratello!").

In six of the scenes (those marked with an asterisk in Group II B of the Table) there is a sudden turn to the minor mode and to allegro tempo for the closing action of the number. Self-modeling is especially evident in *Il corsaro*, *Luisa Miller*, and *Il trovatore*, which share the arpeggio figuration and basic harmonic progression: i, VI, dim. 7/V (lacking in *Il corsaro*), i 6/4, V, i, where the final i chord may be prolonged but is never challenged. Another point of similarity between *Il corsaro* and *Il trovatore* is the end of the slow set piece, with its deceptive

cadence (on the second presentation of a cadential phrase) leading to a short declamatory passage and then to the authentic cadence that concludes the set piece and launches the final allegro.

However important the events in this third stage may be from the point of view of the libretto, the music emphasizes the preceding set piece and the death with which it ends. To take an extreme, and perhaps controversial, example: the libretto of *Il trovatore* tells us that, since Manrico's execution accomplishes the gypsy's revenge, his death is more "important" (however that is defined) than Leonora's. However, the music sends us the opposite message, placing the emphasis on Leonora's death. The potential conflict of libretto and music creates special problems for discussing dramatic closure in opera.<sup>16</sup> In the case of *Il trovatore*, part of the doubly devastating effect of that scene results from this conflict. No sooner have we come to terms with Leonora's death than another death is suddenly thrust upon us.

In *Simon Boccanegra* (1857) the Doge's death does not trigger a violent outburst, as occurred in previous works; instead a mood of tragic resignation prevails. Similarly, in the last two works of group II B -- the second version of *La forza del destino* and *Aida* -- the music of the closing is, to use Verdi's words about *Aida*, "dolce", "vaporoso", "un addio alla vita."<sup>17</sup> In these three works Verdi attenuates or even eliminates the third, closing section. Although there is an identifiable final section after Simon's death, it is in the same slow tempo as the rest of the ensemble. In the revised *La forza del destino* and in *Aida* Verdi goes even further: the set piece ends the opera -- there is no further action, no separate third stage.

This summary of the strategy that Verdi came to prefer sets in relief the variety of approaches that he took in the early 1840s. Many of these endings are effective and dramatically appropriate. There is no reason for the critic, looking ahead to Verdi's adoption of a standard operating procedure, to be embarrassed by this variety or to explain it away as "experimentation". Nor do I wish to imply the teleological view that from the outset of his career Verdi was groping toward the solution adumbrated in 1844-45 (Group II A) and fully established with *Il corsaro* in 1848 (Group II B).

In the works in Group II the sense of dramatic closure either coincides with the death of the victim or follows moments after. But in two



choral-epic works in Verdi's *prima maniera*, the victim's death seems almost incidental (Group III).<sup>18</sup> In *I lombardi* and especially its revision *Jérusalem* the actual denouement is not the death of Pagano/Roger but a scenic effect -- the opening of the tent to reveal Jerusalem liberated. Similarly, the denouement of *Nabucco* is not the death of Abigaille but the preceding scene -- Nabucco's conversion and triumph. That seems to have been the view in the nineteenth century, when Abigaille's relatively short death scene was almost always cut, with the result that the opera ended with the choral hymn of victory "Immenso Jehova". Why did Verdi not give Abigaille an extended aria, in which the principal characters and chorus lavished words of consolation and forgiveness upon her?

One reason is surely that Abigaille, like Macbeth and Otello have committed crimes so grave that neither such an aria nor a consolatory ensemble would be appropriate. They -- especially Macbeth in the first version of the opera and Otello -- must settle for short declamatory solos. Verdi described Macbeth's scene as "una morte brevissima: ma non sarà una di quelle morti solite, sdolcinate etc...."<sup>19</sup> The three wrongdoers in Group IV -- Abigaille, Macbeth, and Otello -- may not literally die alone, but they do die *ungung* and unmourned. In *Macbeth II*, Verdi reverted to a victory hymn, a solution not used since *I lombardi/Jérusalem* and one he specifically rejected in *Attila*, to the dismay of his librettist.<sup>20</sup> I cannot say why the 1847 ending dissatisfied Verdi, and there is not sufficient space to explain here why the revised ending dissatisfies me. But it is clear that the ending remained problematic precisely because the ensemble of compassion -- by that time Verdi's normal choice -- was not a viable alternative. The 1865 ending is nearly unique in Verdi's output. Leonora's *rondò* finale after Oberto's off-stage death is the only other instance where the final set piece is placed after the victim's death. However, the ending of *Macbeth II* does recall the conclusions of two other works of Verdi -- those of the two comic operas. This is hardly surprising, as post-denouement celebration is a convention of comedy.

In the final group (V) the victim is mortally wounded after a final confrontation embodied in the set piece. The dramatic premises of these works clearly rule out a consolatory death scene, whether aria or ensemble. Silva's obsessive vindictiveness is central to the plot of the *Ernani*, and the conspirators, having stabbed Attila, can hardly sing soothing strains to him as he dies. And in *I masnadieri*, Carlo, who has just renounced -- indeed, stabbed -- Amalia, should find it not a little awkward to take part in a consolatory ensemble. In the *Ernani* and *I masnadieri* "conflict ensembles" not only are different emotions are depicted simultaneously, but the dramatic situation undergoes striking changes in the course of the ensemble -- not unlike a typical Mozart ensemble in that respect.<sup>21</sup> Two decades after the composition of *Ernani* Verdi recalled with pride the "Scena e Terzetto Finale,"<sup>22</sup> but after the two works of 1846 and 1847, he never again adopted this approach to the ending. While there are conflict ensembles throughout Verdi's career, he apparently decided early on that as a conclusion they were less desirable than an ensemble of compassion.

\* \* \*

If this hypothesis about Verdi's "standard operating procedure" is accepted, where might we go from here?

I hope that the generalized picture may be helpful in illuminating individual works -- for example, to understand the problems Verdi faced with the ending of *Macbeth*, to understand why, unlike the Byron poem and the Pacini opera, Verdi's *corsaro* commits suicide after Medora's death. We need to learn from colleagues working on Verdi's predecessors and contemporaries how Verdi's preferred method compares with the practice of those composers. So far, my suspicion is that while examples of this strategy may be found in other composers, few adopted it with such consistency as Verdi. And naturally these investigations based on the practice of individual composers will eventually lead us to a more thorough understanding of the broader theoretical issue of closure in 19th-century music drama.

## Notes

1. The present article is a virtually unaltered reprint from the *Atti del XIV Congresso della Società internazionale di Musicologia ...* [Bologna, 1987] (Turin: EDT, 1990) 3: 443-450. Earlier versions were read at a conference on *Macbeth* (Genoa, January 1986) and at the Università degli studi di Bologna (March, 1986).
2. A. Luzio, *Profili biografici e bozzetti storici* (Milan 1927), II, p. 515-516, where the letter is dated 20 January 1853. More likely is the date given here, from G. Cesari and A. Luzio, eds., *I Copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan 1913), p. 532. The *Copialettere* also presents a slightly different reading of the sentence quoted above.
3. *Stiffelio* and its revision, *Aroldo*, are the only serious operas of Verdi's with a *lieto fine*. Both operas originally written for Paris, *Les Vêpres siciliennes* and *Don Carlos*, end with *coups de théâtre* that place them outside the tradition considered here, although they have points of contact with it. For example, the slow ensemble in *Les Vêpres* resembles the "conflict ensembles" discussed below, while the final slow section of the farewell duet of *Don Carlos* recalls some ensemble death scenes, especially those where the dying character hopes to meet his or her loved one(s) "lassù in ciel".
4. Gerald A. Mendelsohn convincingly connects this new direction to Verdi's liaison with Giuseppina Strepponi. See his "Verdi the Man and Verdi the Dramatist" in *19th-Century Music* 2 (1978), p. 110-142 and 3 (1979), p. 214-230; at 2: 126-128.
5. Information about the numbering and titles within Verdi's autograph scores can be found in M. Chusid, *A Catalog of Verdi's Operas = Music Indexes and Bibliographies*, edited by George R. Hill, 5 (Hackensack 1974).
6. In *Oberto* Verdi handles the device less skillfully than Bellini and Donizetti, who probably would have found a way to announce Oberto's death during the *tempo di mezzo* (the section separating the slow movement and cabaletta) rather than before the slow movement, thus providing a sufficiently strong stimulus for the cabaletta. For a discussion of Donizetti's use of the aria finale, see W. Ashbrook, *Donizetti and his Operas* (Cambridge-London-New York-New Rochelle-Melbourne-Sydney 1982), p. 249-256.
7. In *I due Foscari*, however, the Doge dies of a broken heart -- an unusual event in Verdi's dramaturgy -- and it is only at the beginning of the final stretch that establishes that this is indeed a death scene ("Quel bronzo ferale ... mi schiude la tomba").
8. For a discussion of Verdi's treatment of the death agony see M. Beghelli, "Per un nuovo approccio al teatro musicale: l'atto performativo come luogo dell'imitazione gestuale nella drammaturgia verdiana", in *Italica* 64 (1987), p. 632-655, at 646-650, and his *Atti performativi nella drammaturgia verdiana* (Doctoral thesis, Università degli studi di Bologna, 1986), p. 151-177.
9. Alternatively, Verdi may abandon the death scene with mourners in favor of an entirely different approach. See the discussion of the "conflict ensembles" (Group V) below.
10. However, all three scenes include extensive participation of other characters and chorus, just as some numbers classified here as "ensembles" are dominated by a single character (as in the death scenes concluding *La traviata* and *Un ballo in maschera*). So there may be borderline cases between arias and ensembles, and Verdi's nomenclature -- frequently a noncommittal "Finale ultimo" -- is rarely helpful here. Fortunately, the precise classification of the works in Group II A and B as "aria" or "ensemble" is not



crucial to the argument advanced here. However classified, the three scenes from 1844-1845 seem to belong together in a group, as do the later scenes in Group II B.

11. The exception is *Aida*, with its two movements (Andantino, Meno mosso).
12. One might even start the tendency with *I due Foscari* (1844), but *Alzira* (E major) and *Attila* (B<sup>b</sup> -- i.e., only two flats) are exceptions. Verdi's preference for flat keys in death scenes was noted by William A. Herrmann, Jr., in the chapter on death scenes in his "Religion in the Operas of Giuseppe Verdi" ([Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University 1963], pp. 215-6) and by Joseph Braunstein in his article "Celestial Salute" (*Opera News*, 19 March 1951, pp. 4-8, 30-2), which is cited by Herrmann.
13. The death scene in *La battaglia di Legnano* -- with its predominant G-major tonality (i.e., a sharp key) -- is an exception that confirms the rule, for the scene is not tragic but triumphant, the apotheosis of a patriotic hero and the celebration of a victory.
14. *La traviata* is a dramatically motivated exception. Violetta's "resuscitation" postpones her death for a few moments beyond the end of the set piece, the point when she was expected to die.
15. In *Un ballo in maschera* there are chord changes, but they are grounded by the tonic pedal point.
16. Some might even take the extreme position that in some operas the sense of closure is achieved not by any event in the libretto, but by a musical event, such as the soprano's expected *rondò* finale. This would give a new meaning to the colloquial American aphorism, "*The opera ain't over until the fat lady sings*".
17. Letter to Ghislanzoni, probably dated 12 November 1870. Cesari and Luzio, *Copialelettere*, p. 669.
18. Professor Roger Parker suggested the approach taken here. I am grateful to him and to Professor William Ashbrook for their useful comments on a preliminary draft of this article.
19. Verdi's letter of c. 23-30 January 1847 to Felice Varesi. In his letter of 4 February Verdi explains further that Macbeth must not die like Edgardo or Gennaro (the tenors in *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Lucrezia Borgia* -- Verdi clearly has in mind the *finale nuovo* of the 1840 version of *Lucrezia* he must have seen at La Scala). The death scene should be "patetica, ma più che patetica, terribile." D. Rosen and A. Porter eds., *Verdi's Macbeth: A Sourcebook* (New York 1984), p. 37 and 41.
20. J. Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols., (London 1973-1981), I, p. 248.
21. "[...] nell'*Ermani* l'azione continua durante tutto il Terzetto [...]". Verdi's letter of 29 July 1874 to Léon Escudier, in J. G. Prod'homme, "Lettres inédites de G. Verdi à Léon Escudier", in *Rivista Musicale Italiana* 35 (1928), p. 28, 171-197, 519-552; at p. 180.
22. Letter of 1 April 1867 to Léon Escudier, in *Ibid.*, p. 524-525.