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The Tonality of Bb in Verdi's Ballo in Maschera: Fate, Foreshadowing, and Dramatic Unity

Alma Espinosa, University of Massachusetts-Lowell, 1995

Various studies have shown that Verdi, at least in some of his operas, used tonality to underscore various aspects in the drama.1 Here I shall propose that the tonality of Bb, though by no means the only key area linked to the drama in Ballo in Maschera, does symbolize the two elements upon which the story turns: the conspiracy to kill Riccardo and the misunderstanding that brings his erstwhile friend Renato into the assassination plot. Because of this association, Bb acts locally as a vehicle for dramatic irony and, in terms of the opera as a whole, as a foreshadowing device and, as such, a source of dramatic unity.

Ballo depicts the events leading to the assassination of Riccardo, governor of Boston. Mistakenly believing that his wife, Amelia, has been seduced by Riccardo, Renato joins a conspiracy to kill the governor. He fatally stabs him at a masked ball, but Riccardo’s dying words convince him that his jealousy has been misplaced. As the final act draws to a close, Renato experiences crushing guilt while Amelia and the assembled company express their grief and offer prayers.

Throughout the opera the tonality of Bb is associated with the intrigue, the very fate, that leads inexorably to this tragedy. The choice of major or minor mode would seem to depend on the protagonists’ awareness at a given moment of their roles in all of this. Verdi casts the general anguish following the assassination in Bb minor and ends the opera in this key. When he establishes Bb minor earlier in the opera, at least some of the characters onstage are aware of the plan to kill Riccardo.

By contrast, Bb major symbolizes the dramatic irony of situations in which the players are unaware of the part that they are destined to play in the oncoming tragedy. In such contexts, Bb major functions as a sort of subliminal foreshadowing device, communicating at some level what the protagonists will later experience. (While the small “audience” made up of those who study the score is, of course, better able to analyze the contexts in which a given key functions throughout a work, ordinary listeners can and do sense when a piece of music “hangs together.” Recurrence of key areas is surely one of the factors that contributes to this, even for the vast majority that lacks perfect pitch. Something “noticed” at a pre-conscious level may be all the more potent for remaining below the threshold of awareness—a truth that the advertising industry has long used to its advantage.)

A survey of the instances where the tonality of Bb occurs in Ballo should make its symbolic function clear.

In Renato’s first appearance on stage he warns Riccardo that there is a plot to kill him. Renato’s own involvement with the conspiracy lies in the future. But the tonality of Bb major for his aria, “Alla vita che t’arride,” suggests destiny.

Similarly, Oscar the page couches his merry description of the witch Ulrica in Bb major. However, his seemingly innocent prattle in “Volta la terrea” persuades Riccardo to visit her as a joke, thus setting in motion all the mischief that follows.

Some of the most subtle usages of tonality in Ballo occur in connection with this visit. Although Riccardo goes in disguise, Ulrica predicts, correctly, that he will die by the hand of a friend. She intones that it is so written, “Così scritto è lassù.” Only the conspirators know that she is speaking the truth, but the key in which she sings these words—Bb minor—links them to Riccardo’s fate. Similarly, when Riccardo attempts to laugh off her prophecy in “E scherzo od è follia,” he sings in Bb major—ironic confirmation, though he has no way of knowing it, of the very thing he is attempting to ridicule. But Ulrica’s pointed remark to Samuel and Tom—that they are not laughing at her prophecy—is couched in Bb minor: they know what their intentions are, and so, apparently, does she.

Ex. 1.

With a forced attempt at jocularity, Riccardo asks Ulrica who will assassinate him. His question shifts from Bb major to Bb minor, a possible indication that he believes more of the prophecy than he cares to admit; Renato, after all, has already warned him that he is in danger.

When Ulrica tells him that the murderer will be the person who first shakes his hand, Riccardo goes among the courtiers, looking in vain for someone who will step forward and prove her wrong. The music continues in Bb major, foreshadowing what Riccardo, though disquieted, has no way of actually knowing: there are indeed traitors in the assembled group, and they are destined to prevail. As Renato enters and Riccardo rushes over to shake his hand, a prolonged dominant crescendo into a thunderous deceptive cadence; any belief that the friendship between the two men cancels out Ulrica’s prophecy is an illusion.

Ex. 2.

It is important to note that Verdi assigns a separate tonal scheme to Ulrica’s prophecy and to the assassination. Both of these events begin in D— the prophecy on an unaccompanied D, the assassination in D major—and modulate to A major.

Ex. 3a, 3b.

Clearly, the tonality of Bb is not associated with the actual murder but rather with the larger tragedy of Ballo: the key players are inevitably led by coincidence and misapprehension toward an outcome that is disastrous for all concerned.

Act II further illustrates the role that Bb major plays in this opera. Circumstances make it appear, falsely, that Amelia and Riccardo have been meeting secretly; and in “Ve, se’ di notte,” the conspirators mock Renato, the apparently cuckolded husband. They sing in Bb major. Once more, tonality acts as a foreshadowing device. Samuel and Tom know that they intend to kill
rate by the theatergoer. It is, nonetheless, a vital factor in the
symbolizes the workings of fate in

Ex. 6a, 6b.

Between statements of

The conspirators realize that the ball will offer the perfect opportunity to carry out their plans, and Verdi sets their parts in Bb minor. Amelia, too, is aware of what is coming. Renato has forced her to choose the assassin by lot, and the name she has drawn is her husband's. She echoes Oscar's happy tune in a dole-
ful Bb minor.

Ex. 5a, 5b, 5c.

Brilliantly festive music in Bb major for chorus and orchestra marks the beginning of the party scene, providing a menacing undercurrent to the apparent gaiety. The same music returns twice, in the same key, during this scene. Between statements of this material Renato manages to trick Oscar, the governor's page, into identifying his master from among the masked revelers.

The final ensemble takes place after the assassination. Overall, it is in Bb minor, though the mode of Riccardo's sections is ambiguous. His final words—affirming Amelia's innocence, forgiving Renato, and bidding his people farewell—juxtapose major and minor, perhaps a metaphor for Riccardo's benevolence even now, as the threat he chose to ignore has struck him down.

Ex. 6a, 6b.

Riccardo breathes his last, and all present express their horror at what has come to pass. Bb minor continues until the final cur-
tain; fate has run its course.

Summary.

Beyond its specific link to the conspiracy, the tonality of Bb symbolizes the workings of fate in Ballo. For Riccardo, Amelia, and Renato there is no escape from what "is written." Bb minor is the ultimate tonal goal of the opera, because it is linked to the deepest underpinnings of the drama. The occurrences of Bb major and Bb minor at telling moments in the action foreshadow the end, thus unifying the whole. The dramatic context of Bb, while clear to one reading the score, will hardly be noticed—consciously, at any rate—by the theatergoer. It is, nonetheless, a vital factor in the architecture of Ballo.

NOTES

2 Giuseppe Verdi, Un Ballo in Maschera, revised edition of the orchestral score (Milan: Ricordi, n.d.), p. 38. In the present paper all citations refer to this edition.

3 Ibid., p. 50.


5 Ibid., p. 181.

6 Ibid., p. 329.

7 Ibid., p. 454.

8 Ibid., pp. 474, 480.
Ex. 1. Act I, p. 182. Ulrica (to Tom and Samuel).

Text

*Ulrica:* Ah voi, signori, a queste parole mie funeste, voi non osate ridere; che dunque in cor vi sta?


Text

*Riccardo:* Finisci il vaticinio. Di chi fia dunque l'uccisor?

*Ulrica:* Chi primo tua man quest'oggi stringerà.

*Riccardo:* (con vivacità) Benissimo! (offrendo la destra ai circostanti che non osano toccare) Qual è di voi, che provi l'oracolo bugiardo? Nessuno! (Renato appare all'entra. Riccardo accorre a lui e gli stringe la mano) Eccolo.

*Oscar, Samuel, Tom, Chorus:* È deesso!

Text

Ulrica: Ebben, presto morrai.


Text

Renato: (lanciatosi inosservato fra loro, trafigge Ricardo) E tu ricevi il mio!


Text

Renato: Converreste in casa mia sul mattino di domani?


Text

Oscar: "Di che fulgor, che musiche esulteran le soglie, ove..."


Text

Samuel, Tom: (fra loro) "Una vendetta in domino...."

Oscar: "Di che fulgor, che musiche..."

Renato: "La tra le danze esamine...."

Ex. 5c. Act III, pp. 421, 422. Amelia.

Text

Amelia: "(Ed io medesma, io misera, lo scritto inesorato...."


Text

Riccardo: "Ella e pura: in braccio a morte te lo guiro, Iddio m'ascolta: io che amai la tua consorte, rispettato ho il suo candor." (gli dà il foglio) "A novello incarco asceso tu con lei partir dovevi..."


Text

Riccardo: Addio per sempre, miei figli...Addio, diletta America...addio miei figli...per sempre...ah!...ohime! io moro! miei figli...per sem... (la voce gli manca) Addio!