

IV. PRAYERS OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN GIUSEPPE VERDI'S OPERAS. GIOVANNA'S EVENING PRAYER FROM VERDI'S *GIOVANNA D'ARCO* (PROLOGUE, SCENE 2)

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SUMMARY. With this analysis, the author continues the journey of presenting the prayers of female protagonists from Giuseppe Verdi's operas, a lesser-known topic within the vast bibliography dedicated to the *oeuvre* of the great Italian Maestro. *The heroine's Prayer* from the opera *Giovanna d'Arco*, which bears a strong bel canto influence is the fourth in the author's series of analyses of *preghiere* written for the solo female voice found in ten of the composer's works². Further analyses published in this series will shed light upon well-known examples of *preghiere* – like the famous prayers of Leonora from *La Forza del Destino*, which is preceded by two other examples from *Luisa Miller* and *Stiffelio* –, but also ones illustrating the language transformation of the female prayer in mature operatic works, such as *Aida* and *Otello*.

Keywords: *preghiera*, prayer, opera, Verdi, *Giovanna d'Arco*, bel canto, aria, analysis

1. The Creation, Synopsis and Characters of the Work

Verdi's seventh opera, framed chronologically by *I due Foscari* and *Alzira* is also a relevant exponent of multiple, varied prayers, the topic of the work predestining it to such a religious content – similarly to *Nabucco* or *I Lombardi*. *Giovanna d'Arco's* topic was somewhat imposed to Verdi by the impresario of La Scala³, Bartolomeo Merelli, and even though Verdi generally did not like to work with well-known and widely used⁴ topics, he agreed to a new collaboration with Solera and La Scala.

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² The aforementioned analyses focus only on prayers uttered to divinities (both in Christian and pagan contexts), saints or the Virgin Mary, but exclude prayers addressed to the dead (e.g. Lina's second act prayer from *Stiffelio* – *Ah, dagli scanni eterei*).

³ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 205.

⁴ *Ibidem*.



**Giovanna (soprano Svetlana Vassileva)
praying before the statue of the Virgin Mary⁵**

Originality was the goal set out by Verdi's librettist when he started writing the text of the opera. This intention was clearly expressed by Solera in his letter to Giovanni Ricordi⁶, in which he wrote that he did not wish to be neither Shakespeare's, nor Schiller's "epigon"⁷ in rewriting the story. However unintentionally, *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* tragedy would still be the first Schiller source to one of Verdi's operas, a model followed later in *I masnadieri* (inspired by *Die Räuber*), *Luisa Miller* (after *Kabale und Liebe*) and last but not least, *Don Carlos* (based on the drama *Don Carlos, Infant von Spanien*).

A subject that focused on the legendary *Jeanne d'Arc* was more than appropriate for it to be transformed into a work of art to the liking of the Romantic audience. It was placed at the end of the "dark" and mysterious Middle Ages (anno Domini 1429), it was cloaked in mysticism and religious fervor, imbued with nationalism and in a stage in which one could always add a romantic thread to complete it. The operatic stage version adapted by Solera finally took the form of a prologue and three acts, the synopsis of the opera is found in the work *Opera: Composers, Works, Performers*, as follows:

⁵ Photo from the production of *Giovanna d'Arco*. Opera by Giuseppe Verdi. Conductor: Bruno Bartoletti, director: Gabriele Lavia. Cast: Ewan Bowers, Renato Bruson, Svetlana Vassileva. C major & Unitel Classica, 2012. Blu-ray, source: <http://www.blu-ray.com/movies/screenshot.php?movieid=58991&position=4>

⁶ Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi*, vol. I, Ricordi, Milano, 1959, p. 534, in: Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed. cit., p. 205.

⁷ *Henry VI*, part I: one of the Shakespearean play's characters is precisely Joan of Arc (Joan la Pucelle); Schiller had also written a tragedy upon this subject in 1801 (*Die Jungfrau von Orleans*).

"King Charles of France has suffered several defeats at the hands of the English, and is discouraged. A vision leads him to the shepherd girl Joan, who yearns to be the saviour of France. Joan's father fears that she is tempted by the devil to become the king's mistress, and therefore rejects his daughter. Joan leads the French to victory over the English. The king tells her of his love for her, but her father publicly accuses his daughter of being in league with the devil. The crowd calls for Joan to be handed over to the English. In captivity, she renounces her earthly love for the king, and once more saves France. During a final battle, she places herself at the head of the French army again and brings it victory. Mortally wounded, she dies reconciled with her father, having fulfilled her mission."⁸

The audience of the premiere was thrilled about this subject matter, as well as the music of the work, since the February 15, 1845 opening night was a great success (the opera itself was presented just three months after the premiere of *Ernani*⁹). However, the preparations for the stage premiere of the opera experienced so many obstacles that Verdi expected it to be a total failure, thus he chose not to attend the event.¹⁰ The unfavourable circumstances have included the following: "The orchestra was too small and badly arranged; the scenery and costumes were inadequate and the singers inclined to take too many liberties"¹¹, while the prima donna was "always in tears"¹² due to the decline of her voice.

Soprano Erminia Frezzolini was chosen to interpret the newest Verdi heroine, a name already familiar to us from a previous analysis: the prima donna was the role creator of Giselda in *I Lombardi*. The cast had been completed by the performers of the few characters who have survived the massive reduction made by Solera to the characters of Schiller's play: Antonio Poggi (Carlo VII, King of France - Tenor), Filippo Colini (Giacomo - shepherd and father of Giovanna - Baritone), Napoleone Marconi (Delil, a French officer - Tenor), Francesco Lodetti (Talbot, commander in chief of the English army - Bass)¹³. The cast of the opera also features children and peasants, townspeople from Reims, French and English soldiers, noblemen and guards, and last but not least, beings belonging to the immaterial world: namely angels and demons.

⁸ *Opera: Composers, Works, Performers, ed. cit.*, p. 678.

⁹ Teodor Niță, *Orizontul sacru în muzica italiană a secolului al XIX-lea (The Sacred Horizon within the 19th century Italian Music)*, Galați University Press, 2009, p. 124.

¹⁰ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed.cit., p. 206.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Cf. Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed.cit., p. 204.

Addressing the role of Giovanna, musicologist Julian Budden states that it is one of the great successes of this work¹⁴ which has since been forgotten, and whose rare performances legitimized the negative forebodings felt by the composer prior to its original performance. Giovanna was the first character to also inspire the title of one of Verdi's operas, which was followed, of course, by those of *Alzira*, *Luisa Miller*, *La Traviata* and finally, *Aida*. Moreover, it was the first time that Verdi's protagonist does not belong to an upper social class, but is a mere shepherdess. Nonetheless, she becomes the heroine of an entire nation, a true amazon who fights for the liberation of her country, being at the same time a devoted Christian. These contradictory features make Giovanna an unusual and extremely interesting heroine with two well-defined sides, a profane one (daughter, patriot and young woman in love) and a holy one, that of a saint. The controversial phenomena – visions, appearances – that have characterized the life of Joan of Arc are exploited to the fullest also in this work, lending both the composer and the librettist ample opportunities to incorporate a series of elements that ensure the transition from a human dimension to a heavenly one – prayers, Marian apparitions that had taken place within a dream, auditory hallucinations – and the presence of supernatural beings (angels and demons) that become an integral part of the opera.

2. The Communication between the Human and the Supernatural Worlds within the Opera

The communication between the human and the supernatural worlds is one of the characteristic features of the entire work, starting from the prologue of the opera itself. Here, King Carlo recounts how the Virgin Mary appeared before him in a dream (*Sotto one quercia parvemi*). Then, Giovanna's father, fearful, conveys a short utterance to the Heavens, saying "a brief arioso prayer"¹⁵ (*Cielo, cielo, m'attesti*) while searching for his daughter in the middle of a dark forest. The prayer of the heroine herself follows – *Sempre all'alba ed alla sera* –, which we will analyze in detail, as well as an auditory hallucination: Giovanna is tempted by demons (choir *Tu sei bella*, a cheerful waltz in a time signature of 3/8, accompanied by two instruments associated with the demons by Verdi: the harmonium and the triangle¹⁶). There is also the choir of angels, which – now in the opposite direction of communication – brings Giovanna the message that she has been chosen to save France (the contraltos are now accompanied by two

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 223.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 211.

¹⁶ Cf. *Idem*, p. 212.

other instruments: harp and fisarmonica, the second being a type of harmonium used behind the scenes during operas in Italy at that time)¹⁷. Towards the end of the prologue, Verdi composed a very interesting solo segment¹⁸, from at least three distinct viewpoints: 1. he brings together the three protagonists in a *cappella* terzetto, in which 2. Giovanna's upper vocal line invokes the Virgin Mary (*A te, pietosa vergine*), 3. the use of the music's character and technique reminds us of that famous and difficult page of Verdi's *Requiem* (within the *Lacrymosa*) where only the voices of the four soloists are heard.

An illustrious example of praise and of the sublime within music appears in the second act of the opera, with the five voice *a capella* hymn *Te, Dio, lodiam*¹⁹.

A prayer duet is included in *Giovanna d'Arco*, a rarity among the prayers in Verdi's works (still, we can encounter this type of a prayer in the very first opera of the composer when Oberto and his daughter, Leonora pray simultaneously in the duet *Del tuo favor soccorrimi*). A similar moment reappears in *Giovanna d'Arco*'s last act, when Giovanna is in the hands of the British and her father secretly listens to her prayer, being finally convinced of her innocence²⁰. The difference between the two operatic duets is that in *Giovanna d'Arco* only one of the characters is actually praying – thus, the simultaneity of a duet itself is foiled, for the two characters sing together only in the last few bars of the scene.

3. *Sempre all'alba ed alla sera* (Prologue, scene 2) - Analysis

The religious dimension of the work is one of the sources used by Verdi in the creation of the opera's music. The other one is that of war, a source that gives the composer the opportunity to include the military and funeral marches in his work again, alongside the piety of prayers, the heavenly music of the angels and the "unrestrained" waltz of the demons. Since Giovanna is caught in the wake of many different worlds, her prayer will combine both the elements pertaining to religion and those suggesting a military character, for the purpose of her prayer is revealed at the end of her aria. Her desire is to receive a sword and thus to join the French army, a desire that appears in the text of her prayer-aria:

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 213.

¹⁹ Gáspár Krasznai, *Egyházi és színpadi művek kölcsönhatása Giuseppe Verdi művészetében (The Interaction of Verdi's Religious and Laic Works)*, Bachelor's thesis, Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, Budapest, 2007, p. 18.

²⁰ Teodor Niță, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

Sempre all'alba ed alla sera
 Quivi innalzo a te preghiera;
 Qui la notte mi riposo,
 E te sogna il mio pensier.
 Sempre a me, che indegna sono
 Apri allora il cor pietoso...
 Oh se un di m'avessi
 Il dono d'una spada e d'un cimier!²¹
 Ma... le stanche pupille
 Il sonno vince Regina,
 Il baldo voto perdona... e benedicimi.

Always at dawn and in the evening
 It is here I raise my prayer to You;
 It is here that I rest during the night,
 And my thoughts dream of You.
 To me, who am unworthy
 You always open my merciful heart...
 Oh, if one day You would give me
 The gift of a sword and a cimier!
 But... my tired eyes
 Are won over by sleep, My Queen,
 Forgive my bold dream... and bless
 me.²²

(The – *Oh ben s'addice questo torbido cielo* – recitativo which precedes the aria already anticipates Giovanna's desire, and the aria that is composed in the form of a Cavatina repeats the same idea, but in a different and more developed manner.)

The first four verses that Giovanna addresses to the Virgin Mary are uttered in an atmosphere of serenity, peace and tranquillity created by the beginning of the first period (A) composed in an Andante tempo marking, a bright major key (A major) and the ever-present orchestral accompaniment in passages that imitate the sound of the harp (Violin I and II, over the pizzicato of the cello and double bass). The inner peace that Giovanna finds in this particular place – in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary that is hidden in a forest – could not be better portrayed than by the simplistic "minimalism" found at the beginning, centred on the Giovanna's monologue. Giovanna is given a cantabile melodic line ("spiced up" by a few leading tones and anticipations), which is distinguished by its dotted rhythms; which is then repeated with a few minor changes (appoggiaturas and an ornamented ending with a modulation to the dominant).

²¹ The first 8 lines of the aria are repeated.

²² English translation: Juliánna Köpeczi.

E.g. 1

105

Andante sostenuto cantabile

GIOV. *Andante sostenuto*

Sem- pre al. l'al. ba ed al. la se- ra qui- vi in.

Vni

Vcl.

Cb.

Sempre all'alba ed alla sera – the first bars of Giovanna's evening prayer

Looking at Giovanna's vocal line in detail, one can easily observe that it is in fact derived from a single melodic-rhythmic cell. In this regard, we make a formal analysis of the first phrase of the aria, with the relevant analysis concerning the musical cell and motif:

E.g. 2

GIOV.

$x \quad x' \quad xv1 \quad x' \quad x$

$xv1v1 \quad x'v1 \quad xv1v1' \quad x'v2 \quad x \quad x'v1'$

**Example of melody derived from a single cell (x)
- period A, the antecedent phrase**

The following three musical phrases of Giovanna (in a small bistrophic form with a reprise - A Av1, with a phrasal structure of antecedent-consequent-median-consequent if completed with the first phrase) are in turn related variants of this first musical idea, at first just slightly different (creating thus, fluidity and unity), which then move further away farther away from the initial model:

E.g. 3

qui la not - te mi ri - po - so, e te sognai mio pen - - sier.

Sem - pre a me, che inde - gna so - no, a - pri al - lo - ra il cor pie - to - so...

oh se un di m'aves - si il do.no d'u na spa - - da d'u.na spada e d'un ci - mier!

**A melodic model and variation within the *prayer* of Giovanna d'Arco
(Consequent-median-consequent phrases
from the small bistrophic form with the A Av1 reprise)**

Looking at the last musical line of the example above, the difference between this type of writing and the beginning of the aria is evident. While in the former lyricism reigned, here another character dominates, one which we could call "military", clad in a *bel canto* style. The Fortes, the dotted rhythms, the marked accents (and those derived from the leap on the high note) are the many ways Verdi points out the change that is brought into the text, this being the moment when Giovanna denounces the object of her request: she praying for a sword and a cimier.

The next section of the aria²³ reveals a musical fragment (A1) that distances itself from the previous model based on musical periods, having a particularly complex internal structure. Within this musical fragment, firstly an antecedent and a consequent phrase appear (bars 18-25), followed by three broad expansions (bars 26-31, 32-37, as well as bars 38-41).

The musical fragment begins in the same war-like spirit, however, its "military" character is now transferred to the orchestra which, emerges from its secondary role (for the first time within the *preghiere* examples we had thus far analysed) and becomes a "character" that actively participates in the story of the opera. The orchestral sound is more than suggestive, acoustically projecting the battlefield – Verdi achieves this result by opposing the two musical micro-units arising from the unification of cell "x" and that of the *Marziale* motif found in the scene prior to that of the prayer:

E.g. 4

**The relationship between the musical motifs and cells
in the different sections of the prayer**

The acoustic "duel" is carried out not only on the level of the two motifs, but also between the melody of the woodwind section (flute, piccolo, clarinet, bassoon) and the entrances of two chords of the orchestral *tutti*:

²³ The formal division of this Cavatina leads to some problems and gives way to different interpretations in this respect. For example, the musical fragment of the aria perceived as an extended coda (of more than twenty bars) in David R. Kimbell: *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, © Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 347.

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Fg.

v1.

v2.

vc/vb.

v.

- mier! oh seundi.... maves-si il do - no d' u - na

**Musical “duel”: woodwinds versus tutti
(A1 musical fragment, the debut of the antecedent phrase)**

For a moment, it is as if the vocal line is put on a secondary plane (in a recited manner of bars 19-20), for it to put in the foreground once again with bars 26-42, a real *tour de force* for the soprano. The text repeats Giovanna's request, but the 8 verses that have been spoken so far are just "a pretext", so that the voice can showcase its technical qualities. The orchestra retreats once again: the string section return to the pizzicato, we hear some scattered chords of the wind instruments, and, in the end, in *tutti*, a few reminiscent elements of the chord entrances from the beginning of the segment.

The analysis of the nearly twenty bars cannot be other than a vocal language analysis, that of "Verdi's *bel canto*"²⁴ which remains a musical language characteristic of the young composer. The voice that Verdi thought of for this role is a lyrical one, with *leggiero* undertones, which is also evident in the following bars:

E.g. 6

The musical score consists of six staves of music in G major. The first staff is marked *dolce* and contains the lyrics: "Sem - pre al - l'al - ba ed al - la". The second staff continues the melody with lyrics: "se-ra qui - - vi in - nal - - zo a te a te pre -". The third staff is marked *con grazia* and contains lyrics: "- ghiera; qui la not.te mi ri - po - so, e te so-gnail mio pen-". The fourth staff is marked *dolcissimo* and contains lyrics: "- sier. Sem - pre al - l'al - ba ed al - la se-ra qui - - vi in -". The fifth staff is marked *Oppure* and contains lyrics: "- nal - - zo a te pre-ghiera;". The sixth staff continues the melody with lyrics: "- nal - - zo a te pre-ghiera; qui la notte mi ri-po-so, e te sognail mio pen-".

Vocal virtuosity in the prayer of Giovanna d'Arco

²⁴ Although we cannot talk about Verdi as the exponent of the *bel canto* style, it is undeniable that the musical heritage of the three composers had had a great influence on the early work of the master from Busseto.

Various ornaments, legato, direct attack on a high note, portamento, a vocal range of almost two octaves (D₄ - D₆, the greatest vocal range required by Verdi so far in his prayers composed for female solo protagonists), difficult intervals (with leading, augmented and diminished chords) and various rhythms are those that make up this page composed only of virtuoso passages. Albeit difficult, they are the right up the alley of 19th century prima donnas!

The rich vocal score reveals the fact that Verdi worked painstakingly hard and included in his own ornaments in order to prevent the usual practice of prima donnas of the time of adding such ornament – to the point in which in some cases they would "recompose" an aria beyond recognition²⁵. The interpretations we have at our disposal today with renowned 20th century sopranos, such as Renata Tebaldi, Anna Moffo, Monserrat Caballé, June Anderson, etc., render a faithful approach to the musical score. The most "Catholic" interpretation belongs to June Anderson, who complies with the original score to the letter²⁶, singing each note in the way Verdi intended to be sung. The same thing cannot be said of two other famous interpretations of Anne Moffo and Renata Tebaldi, both shortening this difficult fragment by no less than 6 bars, in order to accommodate their own vocal styles. Still, we cannot help but admire the way Renata Tebaldi solves the technical challenges of the score the requires vocal ease with her darker and "heavier" voice; the crystalline high notes of June Anderson's voice, as well as the interpretation of Anna Moffo, that in our opinion is the closest to exhibiting a true *bel canto technique*. Caballé brings a romantic approach to the aria²⁷, with an Andante tempo that is slower than indicated in the score, which also serves be advantageous in order to create a strong contrast between the lyrical and the military-like segments.

However, Giovanna's prayer does not end here: the last section of the aria (A1v, Coda-like character, bars 42-54), is again a lyrical one, in sharp contrast to the middle part. The last words uttered by Giovanna to the Virgin Mary ask for Her forgiveness for the fervour with which she had expressed her plea, and reveal the tender human side of the heroine, who, overcome by exhaustion, falls asleep after the saying her *evening prayer*.

²⁵ We all know the famous case where Adelina Patti, singing to Rossini, ornamented the aria *Una voce poco fa* beyond recognition even to the composer himself. Cf. Harold Schönberg, *A nagy zeneszerzők élete (The Lives of the Great Composers)*, Európa, Budapest, 2002, p. 222.

²⁶ We refer here to the edition used in our analysis: Giuseppe Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco*, Kalmus, Miami, reprinted after Ricordi, Milan, (1875-1980), http://imslp.org/wiki/Giovanna_d%27Arco_%28Verdi,_Giuseppe%29

²⁷ Similarly to the interpretation of soprano June Anderson.

The music is composed here in the manner of a Romantic version of a *recitativo accompagnato*, where the strings evoke the already familiar militant sound, a segment which, nonetheless, acquires a completely different character by the change of entrance (violins: *leggerissimo e staccato*, violas, celli, bass: *pizzicato*) and the dynamic (*pp*). The aria ends in the same peaceful and serene note, with which it began, with the last chords of the string section leading Giovanna in the realm of dreams...

E.g. 7

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system features a vocal line for Giovanna (GIOV.) and a string section. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Ma... le stan,che pu.pille... il son . no .vin .ce... Re .". The string section includes Violins I and II (Vni), Viola (Vle), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabbasso (Cb.). The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "- gi - na, il bal.do vo - to per - do - na..." and the string accompaniment. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. The vocal line is marked "sottovoce" and "pp". The string section is marked "leggerissimo e staccato" and "pizzicato".

**Sempre all'alba ed alla sera - the beginning of the last section
(A1v, with a Coda-like character)**

A final analytical remark on this aria concerns the abundance of indications that Verdi introduces in the score of this crucial fragment. They mostly address the vocal line, the composer being preoccupied with the expression of the textual meaning, via the tone, the volume or the timbre of the voice:

Indication	Text
<i>con passione</i>	<i>inalzo a te preghiera</i>
<i>con energia</i>	<i>oh se un dì m'avessi il dono d'una spada</i>
<i>dolce</i>	<i>Sempre all'alba ed alla sera</i>
<i>con grazia</i>	<i>Riposo</i>
<i>dolcissimo</i>	<i>Sempre all'alba ed alla sera</i>
<i>tutta forza</i>	<i>oh se un dì m'avessi il dono d'una spada</i>
<i>sotto voce</i>	<i>Ma... le stanche pupille il sono vince...</i>
<i>voce quasi spenta</i>	<i>Perdona e benedicimi (words followed by the indication: <i>s'addormenta</i> = she falls asleep)</i>

We end our analysis with a few short conclusions. In *Giovanna d'Arco*, Verdi composed the most difficult *bel canto* score that we have found in our analyses. Vocal virtuosity is matched by an orchestral accompaniment which is often constructed also at a symbolic level, depending on the text that the music accompanies. As we have already observed, the aria shifts effortlessly between different contrast levels - from the lyrical to the dramatic -, thus allowing a prayer and an imaginary battle to be easily associated, with old and 19th century operatic composition techniques intertwining, harmoniously coexisting within the writing. An additional interesting trait of the score is the multiple indications inserted by the composer within the vocal line, which is a testament to the special attention given by Verdi to the music written for his beloved characters/singers.

At the same time, the aria *Sempre all'alba ed alla sera* is also the first *evening prayer* found in our analyses, and the second one that is addressed to the Virgin Mother (the first being that of Giselda in *I Lombardi*), followed by other similar examples that we will find in *La Forza del Destino* and *Othello*.

Translated from Romanian by Juliánna Köpeczi

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