

## I. PRAYERS OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN GIUSEPPE VERDI'S OPERAS FENENA'S PRAYER: *OH, DISCHIUSO È IL FIRMAMENTO*

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**SUMMARY:** With this analysis the author begins a 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. *Fenena's Prayer* from *Nabucco* opens the author's series of analyses of *preghiere* written for the solo female voice found in ten of the composer's works<sup>2</sup>, covering all three of Verdi's creative periods. 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* –, as well as forgotten pages of Verdi's works which at times present surprising elements, such as the very modern prayer of Giselda from *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*. Other such segments will be arias which bear *bel canto* influences (*preghiere* from *Giovanna d'Arco* and *Stiffelio*), but also ones illustrating the language transformation of the female prayer in more mature operatic works, such as *Aida* and *Otello*.

**Keywords:** *preghiera*, prayer, opera, Verdi, *Nabucco*, Fenena, aria, analysis

### 1. The birth of Verdi's first masterpiece and the *preghiere* within the *oeuvre*

*The opera highlights the oppressed Jews' struggle for freedom, set around a love story, within a religious moral framework.*<sup>3</sup>

Mihai Cosma – *Capodopere verdiane (Verdi's Masterpieces)*

Continuing the *bel canto* tradition (and not only) of including prayers within opera music, Verdi provides us with two examples in this regard in

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<sup>2</sup> 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*).

<sup>3</sup> Mihai Cosma, *Capodopere verdiane: ghid de operă (Verdi's Masterpieces: Opera Guide)*, Editura Universităţii Naţionale de Muzică, Bucureşti, 2008, p. 13, - author's emphasis.

the very opera with which he debuted on stage as an opera composer, *Oberto*. The first opera of the young composer, a work that had been written for and that premiered at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan on November 17, 1839, already has two such examples of prayer. None is marked as a “*preghiera*” within the score, however, their text unambiguously indicates this fact. The duet of the 1<sup>st</sup> Act between Leonora and Oberto (*Del tuo favor soccorrimi*), and later Riccardo's aria from Act II (*Ciel pietoso Ciel, ciel clemente*) are therefore Verdi's first operatic prayers.

The comic opera genre has proven to be ‘inappropriate’ for Verdi, at least this is what some analysts believe, based on the failure of his second opera, *Un giorno di regno*. Conversely, at the other end of his oeuvre we find another masterpiece that seems to contradict this hypothesis: *Falstaff*. Of course, here we speak about an entirely different artistic phase, in which Verdi's human/musical/creative maturity had a decisive role to play in his approaching and working within this genre. Going back to *Un giorno di regno*, this opera does not include prayers. Their lack was expected, since the work has an opera buffa topic – in the same manner in which *Nabucco*'s libretto, which was written by Temistocle Solera and was inspired by biblical writings foretold the inclusion of at least one such example within the dramatic thread of the opera.

However, *Nabucco* contains not only one, but several examples of prayers, which all have notable characteristics, some of which bringing certain innovative features within the language of the mid-nineteenth century Italian romantic opera:

A. Part I<sup>4</sup> – The opera begins with a choral part, while the Jewish people flee from the Babylonian army to the temple at Jerusalem. Soon young virgins utter a prayer for the salvation of the people, a prayer that will be taken over then by the entire choir. The instruments that can be distinguished from the orchestral accompaniment are precisely the two instruments that accompanied the religious sentiment over thousands of years of music, namely flute and harp.

B. Part II – The famous and beautiful *preghiera* of Zaccaria: *Tu che sul labbro*.<sup>5</sup> With its warm accompaniment in which the human voice is accompanied by six cellos,<sup>5</sup> also characterized by the fact that it was

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<sup>4</sup> Since the opera is divided in parts and not acts, we will follow the same terminology. – Cf. Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, p. 96.

<sup>5</sup> This idea is often compared to the similar orchestration used by Rossini in the overture of his opera *William Tell*, – Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 103.

marked as a *Preghiera* in the score, Verdi entitling and marking a sung prayer for the first time in his work.<sup>6</sup>

C. Part III – *Va, pensiero* – the most famous segment of the opera,<sup>7</sup> which became the anthem of the Risorgimento,<sup>8</sup> is considered to be a sacred element of particular importance within the opera analysis rendered by Teodor Niță in his work *Orizontul sacru în muzica italiană a secolului al XIX-lea*<sup>9</sup> (*The Sacred Horizon within the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian Music*). Although we do not consider this choir to be a prayer (based solely on its text), the hypothesis is substantiated in other analyses by way of the fact that the text of this particular choir represents the paraphrase of a psalm<sup>10</sup> (Psalm 137, according to the King James Version: “*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept...*”), while the model after which it was written is often identified by analysts as being the famous choir prayer initiated by Mosé in *Mosé in Egitto*.<sup>11</sup>

D. Part IV – Nabucco’s Prayer, *Dio di Giuda*, “with an introductory dialogue between cello and flute”,<sup>12</sup> a prayer with a “simple” melody,<sup>13</sup> which impresses precisely due to this quality;

E. Part IV – Fenena’s Prayer - *Oh, dischiuso è il firmamento*

F. Part IV – Final ensemble of the work, *Immenso Jehovah*, an *a cappella* choral hymn (a new innovation that Verdi brings to the nineteenth century opera), addressed to the god of the Jews, glorified by Nabucco as well, who converted to the Mosaic religion.

G. Other elements – of positive or negative content – pertaining to man addressing the divine. For example, in the first part, Abigail invokes Jehovah (*Ah, t’invoco, già ti sento, Dio verace d’Israello*), then Nabucco blasphemes Him at the end of the same part. Or in the

<sup>6</sup> Krasznai Gáspár, *Egyházi és színpadi művek kölcsönhatása Giuseppe Verdi művészetében* (*The Interaction of Verdi’s Religious and Laic Works*), BA thesis, coord. by M. Tímár Ágnes and dr. Batta András, Liszt Ferenc Music University, Budapest, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Mihai Cosma, *Capodopere verdiane: ghid de operă* (*Verdi’s Masterpieces: Opera Guide*), Editura Universității Naționale de Muzică, București, 2008, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> RISORGIMENTO, (Italian: “Rising Again”), “19th-century movement for Italian unification that culminated in the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The Risorgimento was an ideological and literary movement that helped to arouse the national consciousness of the Italian people, and it led to a series of political events that freed the Italian states from foreign domination and united them politically.”

Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/504489/Risorgimento>, accessed on November 5, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Teodor Niță, *Orizontul sacru în muzica italiană a secolului al XIX-lea* (*The Sacred Horizon within the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian Music*), Galați University Press, 2009, pp. 117-118.

<sup>10</sup> Budden, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> Niță, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> Budden, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

opposite direction of communication, when the deity addresses the people with a message spoken by one of his chosen people: the prophecy of Zaccaria (*Del futuro nel buio*, Part III); the entire work ending with praise, words of worship to Jehovah.

## 2. Fenena's Character and Prayer

Fenena's prayer, which we would like to closely consider, could not be understood or analyzed without knowing and understanding the libretto and Fenena's character and personality.

Divided into four parts, each accompanied by a Biblical quotation, the story of *Nabucco*, the opera, is complex and filled with "unexpected" turn of events. Its libretto was written by Themistocles Solera based on the Biblically inspired work of authors Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornue, *Nebuchadnezzar* and an eponymous ballet by Antonio Cortesi.<sup>14</sup> Since the opera is one of the most famous works of the composer, its story is widely known, for this reason we would like to present it in a different light, namely from the standpoint of Fenena's character.

Fenena's (social) identity status plays a crucial role in the way her destiny will develop. As the daughter of the king of Babylon, Fenena is an inevitable figure of the political intrigue that takes place on the opera stage. In addition, the harbored feelings she has for Ismaele, the nephew of the king of Jerusalem, do not support her political and religious status, leading to conflicts and forcing her to make difficult choices.

At the beginning of the opera, Fenena is the prisoner of the Jews, since she had been kidnapped by the grand-priest Zaccaria and entrusted to Ismaele (we do know that the two are secretly in love, without anyone knowing it). At this time, Fenena is a trophy, an ace up Zaccaria's sleeve that he believes he holds against the invading Babylonians. After the entry of Nabucco in the temple at Jerusalem, Zaccaria threatens to kill her, but is saved by Ismaele, who in turn will be condemned by the Jews for this act of treason.

Part II presents an entirely different situation: Fenena reigns in the palace of Babylon, being named regent by Nabucco, while he continues his military campaign against the Jews.<sup>15</sup> Fenena's position is threatened by her half-sister, Abigaille, who learns that she is the daughter of slaves, and not the legitimate daughter of Nabucco. The *coup* prepared by Abigaille is aided by the fact that Nabucco appears unexpectedly – following the rumors launched by Abigaille that he would have died in battle – and he "haughtily

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<sup>14</sup> See also Ibidem, pp. 90, 95.

<sup>15</sup> *Opera. Composers, Works, Performers*, Ed. András Batta, Könnemann, 2005, p. 668.

proclaims himself God",<sup>16</sup> but the wrath of the Almighty punishes him and makes him lose his mind. Fenena herself also falls from her royal status, at the moment when Zaccaria reveals that she converted to Judaism...<sup>17</sup>

At the beginning of Part III, Abigaille occupies the throne of Babylon who, thirsting for power, banishes his father, but first lures him to sign a document condemning the Jewish people – and implicitly Fenena – to death,<sup>18</sup> who is now a simple prisoner among this people. The Jews, with Fenena among them, are assembled on the banks of the Euphrates, and deplore their lost freedom, still, their hope resurrected by the prophet Zaccaria, in whose prophecy the fall of Babylon is foretold.<sup>19</sup>

The entire plot of the last part is set in motion, in fact, by Fenena's character. The imprisoned Nabucco, sees the enslaved Fenena preparing for death, causing him to turn to the God of Israel for the power to save his daughter from death. His plea is heard, and Nabucco regains his sanity and manages to rescue Fenena. Abigaille commits suicide, but before that she asks for forgiveness from Fenena and the Jews for her actions, thus making the work among the few operas (or *dramma lirico*, as Verdi calls it in this case) with a happy ending in which good triumphs over evil and the villain admits her mistakes whilst receiving her due punishment.

The character traits that depict Fenena and are outlined in the four parts of the work are unequivocally positive. The beauty of her character – Fenena is full of nobility and simplicity, is selfless, to name just some of them – coupled with courage to match (remember, the princess of Babylon converts to the Jewish religion...) make her the prototype of the representation of a positive romantic female character. We do not deny, however, that Fenena's character is less emphasized than that of Abigaille. Quoting Hungarian musicologist Varnai Péter "best portrayed characters – similarly to each and every oeuvre of Verdi – are those characters that evolve throughout the narrative of the work, either in a positive or negative manner. Within the opera *Nabucco*, these two characters are Nabucco and Abigaille".<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we have found that Fenena's character, alongside her musical facet are usually neglected in the analyses of *Nabucco*...

Alongside her defining character traits, the relationship she has with the most important characters of the opera – Abigaille, Nabucco and Ismaele – are crucial. Her love for Ismaele inevitably leads to conflict and to situations in which she must choose between her Babylonian princess identity and that of a woman in love. She chooses, courageously, to be the second one.

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<sup>16</sup> Cosma, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> *Opera. Composers, Works, Performers*, p. 668.

<sup>20</sup> Varnai Péter, *Verdi operakalauz (Verdi Opera Guide)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1978, p. 41.

The relationship between Nabucco and Fenena is ambivalent in the sense that Nabucco sees her as a daughter merely as long as she follows the same customs, laws and religion as her father. When, however, she makes her own choices, then he is ready to send her to her death, together with all those [the Jews] who refuse to proclaim him God.<sup>21</sup> Conversely though, Fenena will be one who will "save" Nabucco from his madness: the thought that Fenena will be killed pushes Nabucco to turn towards Jehovah and to accept him as the true God; to regain his sanity and to act so as to regain his initial glory.

At the opposite pole of Fenena we find Abigaille. A strong yet power-thirsty woman, Abigaille considers Fenena to be her rival on two levels: politically and personally. The hatred he feels towards her, pushes her to send Fenena to death without any remorse. However, the intrigues, the selfish and unscrupulous calculations of Abigaille will neither bring her Ismaele's love, nor the throne that she so coveted. Abigaille experiences a downfall similar to Lady Macbeth, while good triumphs over evil, this time.

From a symbolic and unusual angle, we can identify a fourth character who plays a major role in Fenena's destiny. This character does not appear in the characters of the opera, and yet is always present. He is the god of the Jews, Jehovah, and the relationship between Fenena and Him can be deciphered precisely from Fenena's last aria, her prayer, the text of which reads:

Oh dischiuso è il firmamento!  
 Al Signor lo spirto anela...  
 Ei m'arride, e cento e cento  
 Gaudi eterni a me disvela!  
 O splendor degl'astri, addio!  
 Me di luce irradia Iddio!  
 Già dal fral, che qui ne  
     impiomba,  
 Fugge l'alma e vola al ciel!

Oh The firmament is open!  
 My spirit yearns for the Lord..  
 He smiles on me and hundreds and  
     hundreds  
 Of eternal joys are unveiled to me!  
 O splendour of the stars, farewell!  
 God will irradiate me with light!  
 My soul already flees the frailty  
 Which seals it here and flies to Heaven!

Reading the text of this aria, we tend to forget that narrative of the work takes place in the year 587 BC. For the aria has a striking resemblance to the mystical vision of a medieval nun; or it is as if we see Joan of Arc – both a historical character and one of Verdi's heroines – in a heavenly vision. The Catholic spirit in which the text is composed is devoid of any trace of the musical exoticism we would expect in a story set in the Orient, an exoticism that will appear in a later creative stage – we make reference here to the opera *Aida* and its superb choir *O, tu che sei d'Osiride*, of act III.

<sup>21</sup> See also Budden, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.

Regarding other analytical aspects of this prayer, here are a few lines of musicologist Tatiana Oltean's analysis:

Fenena's aria, *Oh! Dischiuso e' il firmamento* (O, the firmament is opened) precedes the final scene of the opera Nabucco, mentioned above, an ample ensemble scene invoking Jehovah. This moment is heartbreaking: the heroine is about to be sacrificed by order of her father, who does not know that he signed the death sentence of his daughter by his own hand, alongside the Hebrew slaves by way of the subterfuge of her sister Abigaille. On the verge of her upcoming death Fenena's only thought is that of her soul flying to heaven. Nothing betrays anxiety. The orchestral accompaniment is carried out by a formula of ostinato arpeggios in the string section, lending it a true Donizettian atmosphere, interrupted in places by fermatas and emphasized – also in the strings section – by pizzicato. A harmonic structure is extremely simple, diatonic, depicting the serenity of the moment, with two brief modulations to the relative of the dominant scale, and then to the dominant scale, subtly coloring the stillness conveyed by the rhythmic ostinato in the accompaniment. The atmosphere is dark, but subtly, by introducing the lowered sixth scale step in the last measures of the aria, but the disturbance is quickly resolved by returning to the major scale. If in the first part of the aria the text flows fluently without repetitions, the central theme of the area – *Fugge l'alma e vola al ciel* – is repeated three times, either fragments of it or in full, outlining snippets of an ascending melodic line, rhetorically illustrating the ascending flight of the heroine's soul, each time to a higher altitude.<sup>22</sup>

We continue our analytical observations by pointing to other matters we consider to be important. Firstly, we want to emphasize that the arpeggios in the accompaniment is a composition technique frequently used by the *bel canto* tradition in opera prayers. (Of course, this approach – so popular with *bel canto* composers – does not only appear in prayers, but also in the lyrical arias of the age. We bring forth merely one example: Count Almaviva's aria – *Ecco, Ridente in cielo* – from *The Barber of Seville*). Consequently, Verdi's approach is considered to be as that of the successor of the previous tradition from this standpoint as well.

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<sup>22</sup> Tatiana Oltean, *Etape stilistice în creația lui Giuseppe Verdi. Ipoteze ale rugăciunii*, referat prezentat la Simpozionul Stil și Stiluri în creația și interpretarea muzicală (Style Periods in the Work of Giuseppe Verdi. Facets of Prayer) paper presented at the „Style and Styles in Musical Composition and Interpretation” Symposium at the “Gh. Dima” Music Academy, Cluj-Napoca, April 2008. “Gh. Dima” Music Academy, Cluj-Napoca, April 2008.

Another observation about this process would be the fact that the writing is characteristic for the harp, an instrument associated with religious sentiment. In this case, however, it appears in the viola section<sup>23</sup> (the accompaniment of the aria employing the string section – the *pizzicato* of violins and double basses, a bassoon and two horns in F and C playing harmonic pedals), while Zaccaria's prayer was previously accompanied by six cellos...

This tranquil and lyrical segment of the opera is put in a relatively simple formal context. The text is structured in a small bi-strophic form (A Av<sup>24</sup>), which involves at the end of the last musical period two external expansions. These expansions occur due to repetition of the above mentioned text (*Fugge l'alma e vola al ciel*), the number of repetitions (a total of three) probably are not accidental, but having a rhetorical facet, the number three being often associated with the notion of the Divine.

One last interesting and at the same time debatable aspect regards the voice typology intended for the role. The singer who first interpreted Fenena at the world premiere of the opera, Giovannina Bellinzaghi,<sup>25</sup> was in fact named as a "soprano comprimario" in the cast of the performance, although one of the most well-respected Verdi analyst, Julian Budden, stated that the range of the role is consistent with that of the voice of a mezzo-soprano.<sup>26</sup> From this ambivalence arises the possibility of the role of Fenena to be interpreted both by sopranos (Violeta Urmana<sup>27</sup>), and mezzo-sopranos (Viorica Cortez, Fiorenza Cossotto).

This particular challenge of the role was well known even by Verdi, who for the "fall performance of the work" in 1842, when Fenena was interpreted by soprano Amelia Zecchini,<sup>28</sup> Verdi rewrote this area. We illustrate the two versions – the new one, filled with bel canto ornaments and the original one – conveying<sup>29</sup> the musical example found in the volume of author Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars*:

<sup>23</sup> See the score at [http://conquest.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/d/db/IMSLP45976-PMLP51151-Act\\_IV.pdf](http://conquest.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/d/db/IMSLP45976-PMLP51151-Act_IV.pdf), accessed 13.06.2014.

<sup>24</sup> The phrasal structure of this bi-strophic is a typical one: antecedent and consequent within period A; median and consequent within period Av (period that begins in bar 21 with *Auftakt*).

<sup>25</sup> An ensemble cast that was highly appreciated by Verdi: Giuseppina Strepponi (Abigaille), Giorgio Ronconi (Nabucco), Corrado Miraglia (Ismaele), Prosper Déryvis (Zaccaria), Gaetano Rossi (The High Priest), Napoleone Marconi (Abdallo), Teresa Ruggeri (Anna) – Budden, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Budden, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>27</sup> We would like to mention the fact that although Violeta Urmana is considered today to be one of the most famous dramatic sopranos in the world, she also sang mezzosoprano roles (Eboli, Azucena), even starting her career with such roles.

<sup>28</sup> Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars*, University of Chicago Press © 2006, p. 298.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.



## Ex. 1

59 *p* *cresc.*

"puntata" Già dal fral, che qui ne im-piom - ba, fug - ge

original Già dal fral, che qui ne im - piom - ba, fug - ge

61 l'al - ma, fug - ge l'al - ma e vo - la, e vo - la al ciel!

l'al - ma, fug - ge l'al - ma e vo - la al ciel!

**Fenena's Prayer – the original version, written for mezzo-soprano, and the modified version composed for soprano Amalia Zecchini**

It would seem that Verdi wrote also a third version of this aria, when preparing *Nabucco* at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, on December 26, 1842, for "the distinguished performer Almerinda Granchi",<sup>30</sup> who was to play the role of Fenena. Verdi kept the original text, but he made the aria "longer and more grandiose"<sup>31</sup> than the original. Finally, we present the entire score of Fenena's Prayer, *O dischiuso é il firmamento*.

## Ex. 2

FENENA

20 *ANDANTE* *cantabile* 225

Oh di-schiuso è il fir-ma-

<sup>30</sup> Budden, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

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- men - to! Al Si - gnor lo spir - to.... a -  
 - ne - la... Ei m'ar - ri - de, cen - to e cen - to gau - die -  
 - ter - ni a me ..... di - sve - la! O splendor..... degl'a - stri, ad -  
 - di - o! Me di lu - ce ir - ra - dia l' d. *con enfasi*  
 - di - o! ..... Già dal frat, che qui..... ne im -  
 - piom - ba, fug - ge ..... l'al - ma, fug - ge .....



**Fenena's Prayer – *Oh, dischiuso è il firmamento* (Nabucco, Part IV, scene 2)**

At the end of our analysis, we would like to formulate a few conclusions regarding Fenena's prayer: 1. diachronically, Verdi's first *preghiera* written for the female voice makes its appearance in the first great operatic success of the composer, 2. the aria continues the *bel canto* tradition of opera writing, 3. its "simplicity" and "non-sophistication" match the pure, simple and noble character of Fenena, 4. its text resembles a vision often recalled by mystical nuns, 5. Fenena's prayer offers some archetypal features which (will) reoccur in later prayers written by Verdi for his female protagonists – the prayer is uttered before the culminant point of the libretto under the form of a petition; it is written in a major tonality, suggesting the hope of the one who speaks it; the orchestral accompaniment is made out of arpeggios (recalling thus the sonority of a typical "religious instrument", the harp); rhetorical elements are invoked to emphasise the words of the aria –, 7. *Oh, dischiuso è il firmamento* is the only verdian prayer written for a primadonna which can be sung by a mezzosoprano, 8. it is the sole prayer in which a female character speaks to the god of the Jews, Jehovah.

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