

GIUSEPPE VERDI: *UN BALLO IN MASCHERA*

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SUMMARY. The following study will attempt to depict the creation process of one of Verdi's most dramatic operas – *Un Ballo in Maschera*. As it was the case many times throughout history, the genesis of this work was also influenced by the politics of the day. Due to strenuous political times, Verdi was compelled to change the setting of his opera and also alter the names of the characters in order not to create havoc for the entire art scene on Italy. Although one might state that the composer was obliged to make compromises, one could safely say that these did not affect by any means the message of the opera or the dramatic impact it had then, on the day of the premiere or even so today, 151 years after its creation.

Keywords: Verdi, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, creation process, synopsis, musical portrayal, Amelia, personal impressions

In September 1857, we find Verdi once again at his estate in Sant'Agata, where he is working on a new work commissioned by the San Carlo Theatre in Naples. Not having received from Torelli² the assurance that he will obtain the adequate cast for a *King Lear* he intended on delivering, Verdi once again dismissed the work. He considers many other titles, such as Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas*, and another Spanish plot, but seeing as he could not reduce these works to his satisfaction, he abandons them.

Verdi then stumbles upon *Gustave III* by Auber³, an opera presented 20 years earlier at the Grand Opera in Paris, based on a libretto by Scribe⁴.

In a letter written to Torelli on December 19 Verdi acknowledges the basic qualities that have insured Scribe a well-deserved place on all of the theatre stages of Europe, however, we can also sense his aversion against the French playwright: "*Gustav III contains exceptional dramatic resources and the narrative threads are woven in a remarkable manner. Unfortunately,*

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² Torelli, Vincenzo – the head of the *L'Omnibus* gazette in Naples, the secretary of the Neapolitan San Carlo Theatre during 1857.

³ Auber, Daniel François Esprit (1782 – 1871) was a French composer.

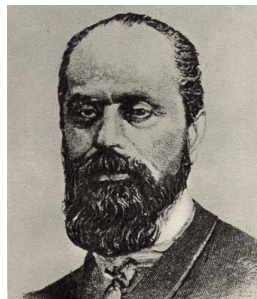
⁴ Scribe, Augustin Eugène (1791 – 1861), was a French dramatist and librettist. He is best known for the perfection of the so-called "well-made play" (*pièce bien faite*). This dramatic formula was a mainstay of popular theater for over 100 years.

*we can also find elements of convention so often utilized in works that were written to be put on music. I have always resented this, and now it has become unbearable. The libretto should be entirely rewritten, and I am distraught, for there is no more time left. If you do not necessarily care for an entirely new opera, I would propose to make an adaptation in the same manner in which we did *La battaglia di Legnano* and *Aroldo* - merely adding the needed passages*".⁵

The composer resumes the subject of Gustav III, entrusting Somma not to adapt, but to rewrite the play. Torelli warns Verdi that the Italian censorship will most likely forbid the representation on stage of the assassination of a ruling monarch. However, Verdi is ready for this: "*I we will need to, we will change the era and location of the plot, such as we did for *Rigoletto*, the most important aspect is the dramatic facet. Although, I imagine we will have a hard time finding a Duke who will be able to measure up to Gustav III. Oh, the poor poets! And poor composers!*"⁶, comments Verdi, who on the 21st of October 1857 sends a libretto to the management of the San Carlo Theatre for censorship approval.

Without waiting for the result, the composer urges Somma to finish the versification. Consequently, by the end of November the libretto is finished. Verdi intervened with a few small touches – asking the reduction of certain situations, as well as the avoidance of strophic arias.

Fig. 1



Antonio Somma

As far as the first act goes, namely the scene in which the witch foresees his impending death, Verdi writes to following to Somma: "*Although you say all that has to be said, the words do not seem effective enough. This scene has to be intensely alive. Unfortunately, neither the amazement of the witch regarding her discovery, or the surprise of the conspirators, nor Gustav's indifference stands out sufficiently. Does the prosody or the rhyme hinder you? Construct a recitative instead if you wish, I would rather have a good recitative, instead of a poorly written verse.*" ... "The duet between Amelia

⁵ Luzio-Cesare, *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, Milano, 1935, p. 95.

⁶ Gatti, C., *Verdi I-II*. Milano, Alpes, 1931. p. 76.

and Gustav is splendidly edited. I found the warmth and movement of passion. I wish I could say the same about Amelia's aria that precedes this scene. Perhaps it is the division of the verse that diminishes its quality".⁷

Meanwhile, Verdi works on the music. By the end of December, the greater part of the opera is finished. If in fact at the beginning of the commission the composer was only half way satisfied with the subject, by altering it here and there, smoothing out its rough edges as well as exploring the possibilities the theme had to offer, Verdi – in later correspondence with Somma – ended up referring to the libretto as “ours”. In the end, he got the libretto he wanted: a concise work, full of contrasting elements, at times sombre and fantastic, or witty and lofty: “there is something brilliant and a little French within the plot.” At the same time, he does not lose sight of the fact that he needs to change the name of the actual historic figures into fictional characters, if he intends on getting the approval of the censor. Thus, the title of the work will be *La Vendetta in Domino*, instead of *Gustavo Tre*.

Verdi consequently entered into negotiations, with the management of the Apollo Theatre of Roma, while Jacovacci⁸ continues the mediation with the Roman censorship. The censors would authorize the subject and the situations depicted in the opera, but would like for the location of the story to be set outside of Europe. The composer suggests North America, in the colonial era and so the revision work begins. The King of Sweden becomes Riccardo, the Earl of Warwick and governor of Boston and the final title will end up being *Un Ballo in Maschera*. It will take the entire month of August 1857 for Somma to deliver these crucial changes. Since the Verdi has previous obligations, such as staging *Simon Boccanegra*, and achieving a well-earned success with this premiere, he will be able to focus his entire attention on *Un Ballo in Maschera* only at the beginning of 1859. The composer is concerned about the cast, as always, even though the Apollo Theatre puts foremost Verdian tenor Frascini⁹ at his disposal, for the role of Riccardo, while the brilliant Giraltoni¹⁰ will sing the role of Renato. Nevertheless, Verdi has some reservations regarding the soprano Julienne-Dejean¹¹ who was intended to sing the role of Amelia.

⁷ Pascolato, A., *Re Lear e Ballo in maschera*, Citta di Castello, Lapi, 1913.

⁸ Jacovacci, Vincenzo (1811-1881). Italian impresario. Celebrated for his shrewd management of the Apollo Theatre, Rome, he gave the premières of Verdi's *Il trovatore* (1853) and *Un ballo in maschera* (1859).

⁹ Frascini, Gaetano (1816-1887); Italian tenor who was well respected and admired by Verdi, role creator of: Corrado from *Il Corsaro*; Riccardo from *Un Ballo in Maschera*; Alvaro from *La Forza del Destino*

¹⁰ Giraltoni, Leone (1824-1897). Italian baritone, role creator of: Simon Boccanegra; Renato from *Un Ballo in Maschera*

¹¹ Julienne-Dejean, Eugenia. Italian soprano, role creator of Amelia from *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

In the end, the premiere of the opera takes place with a roaring success on February 17, 1859. Agiolini conducted the performance. The critics will emphasize the great complexity of the work based on a mixture of genres, which in fact created a new sort of dramatic reality.

Synopsis

Place, Boston, Massachusetts.

Time, Boston: the end of the 17th century.

Act 1

Scene 1: A public audience at Riccardo's palace, attended by his supporters, but also by his enemies who hope for his downfall. Riccardo reviews the list of guests who will attend an upcoming masked ball. He is elated to see on the list the name of the woman he loves – Amelia, the wife of his friend and advisor, Renato. (Aria: *La rivedrà nell'estasi* / "With rapture I shall look upon her"). When Renato arrives, he tries to warn Riccardo about the growing conspiracy against him (aria: *Alla vita che t'arride* / "To the life with which you are favoured"), but Riccardo refuses to listen to his words. Next, Riccardo is presented with a complaint against a fortune-teller named Ulrica, accused of witchcraft. A magistrate calls for her banishment, but Oscar the page defends her (Aria: *Volta la terrea* / "That tense countenance"). Riccardo resolves to investigate for himself and tells the members of the court to disguise themselves and to meet him at Ulrica's lodging later that day.

Scene 2: At Ulrica's dwelling

Ulrica summons her magical powers: *Re dell'abisso, affrettati* / "King of the abyss make haste". Disguised as an angler, Riccardo arrives before the others. He makes the fortune of a sailor named Silvano come true by spiriting a document of promotion into his pouch, convincing the crowd of the truth of Ulrica's powers. When he realizes that Amelia is coming to see Ulrica, he hides and watches. Alone with Ulrica, Amelia confesses that she is tormented by her love for Riccardo, and asks for a means to bring peace to her heart. Ulrica tells her to gather a certain herb with magical powers; Riccardo resolves to be there when she does so. Amelia leaves. Now Riccardo presents himself again, along with all of the courtiers, and asks to have his fortune told. (Aria: *Di' tu se fedele* / "Say whether the sea Awaits me faithfully"). Ulrica reveals that the next man who shakes his hand will kill him. He laughingly dismisses her prophecy and offers his hand to the courtiers, who refuse to take it. Renato arrives and shakes Riccardo's hand in greeting. Riccardo's identity is now revealed and the people acclaim him.

Act 2

On the outskirts of the town, at the gallows-place. Midnight
Amelia, conquering her fears, has come here alone to pick the herb of which Ulrica told her (Aria: *Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa / "If through the arid stalks"*). Riccardo, who has come to meet her, surprises her. Now the two finally declare their love for each other.

Unexpectedly, Renato arrives, and Amelia covers her face with her veil before he can recognize her. Renato explains to Riccardo that the conspirators are pursuing him, and his life is in danger. Riccardo leaves, making Renato promise to escort the veiled woman safely back to town, not asking her identity. When the conspirators arrive, they confront Renato; in the struggle, Amelia's veil drops. Renato assumes that Amelia and Riccardo have been involved in an adulterous love affair. He asks the two leaders of the conspiracy, Samuel and Tom, to meet him the next day.

Fig. 2



Leone Giraldoni (Renato)

Act 3

Scene 1: Renato's house

Renato has resolved to kill Amelia for the dishonour she has brought on him. She protests her innocence and begs to see her son one last time. (Aria: *Morrò, ma prima in grazia / "I shall die – but one last wish"*). Renato relents, and declares that it is Riccardo, not Amelia, who deserves to die (Aria: *Eri tu che macchiavi quell'anima / "It was you who stained this soul"*).

Samuel and Tom arrive, and Renato asks to join their plot, pledging the life of his son as proof of his sincerity. They agree to draw lots to decide who will kill Riccardo. Amelia is forced to draw the winning name – Renato.

Oscar, the page, arrives with invitations to the masked ball; Samuel, Tom and Renato agree that this is where the assassination will take place.

Scene 2: The ball

Riccardo, torn between love and duty, has resolved to renounce his love for Amelia and send her and Renato back to England (Aria: *Ma se m'è forza perderti / "But if I am forced to lose you"*).

At the ball, Renato tries to learn from Oscar what costume Riccardo is wearing. Oscar at first refuses to tell (Aria: *Saper vorreste / "You want to know How he is dressed"*), but finally answers: a black cloak and a red ribbon.

Riccardo manages to identify Amelia and tells her of the decision he has made. As they say goodbye, Renato stabs Riccardo. The wounded Riccardo discloses that though he loved Amelia, she never broke her marriage vows. He pardons all the conspirators, bidding farewell to his friends and his country as he dies.

Fig. 3



The Apollo Theatre in Rome

Amelia's Musical Portrayal

The most beautiful lyrical pages of the opera belong to non other than Amelia, this charming, innocent character, who loves and suffers for her love. Her true inner feelings are depicted with great emotion. It is highly interesting the manner in which Verdi uses different musical themes that are “tailored” to fit particular characters with the purpose of conveying the atmosphere of a scene. One of the nuclei within the opera is represented by the sixth leap – both in an ascending and descending direction – representing the musical symbol of the love between Amelia and Riccardo.

Ex. 1

a)

mf

b)

Se gre ta,a - cer - ba cu - ra che,a - mor des - to...

Amelia's melodic line is filled with this motif since her first appearance on stage, the nucleus emerging also within the theme of the aria at the beginning of the second act, as well as in the lyrical solo of the cello that accompanies the duet between Amelia and Riccardo.

Ex. 2

a)

Ma dal - l'a - ri - do ste - lo di - vul - sa

b)

il ba - le - - - no del - l'i - ra

The following statement may appear to be surprising; however, in our opinion Amelia's character has a higher degree of dramatic impact. Since her first appearance on stage, we can sense the tense atmosphere suggested by the orchestra. The melody played by the orchestra – which could very easily be a “duplicate” of a certain musical motif from *La Forza del Destino* – foretells the dramatic temperament of the character. Her personality, her inner struggle is portrayed in a magnificent way in the orchestral introduction of the second act. The first as well as the third segment of this introduction depicts Amelia's inner struggle, while the mid section suggests the peace achieved by her. The following aria, introduced by the melancholic solo of the horn – evokes emotions of despair and sadness. The principal theme of this aria is one of the saddest and most painful melodies ever written for soprano, possibly matched only by “*Addio del passato*” from *Traviata*. This aria requires an exclusively dramatic voice, not unlike the trio of the previous scene, as well as the trio of the second act. In contrast, Amelia's aria from the third act is more lyrical, later altered by the dramatic feel of the following quartet.

The principal female character evolves throughout the opera, in contrast with the multifaceted but static character of Riccardo. She goes from repressing her feelings to the duet in which they both confess their love, and all the way up to facing the consequences that arose from this love.

In conclusion, we can safely state that the part of Amelia is a soprano-spinto role, a voice of transition from lyrical to dramatic. All throughout the part, we can find recitatives with a dramatic content alternated by lyrical arioso, duets or trios, which culminate in almost heroic musical moments.

Personal Impressions

Un Ballo in Maschera's Amelia was in fact my first Verdian role. Back then I had no idea of the wonderfully magical and mysterious world in which this role will initiate me.

I have started to study this role in November 1973, Although this was not my first role on the stage of the Hungarian Opera in Cluj-Napoca – since my repertoire already had counted among others roles, such as: Lucia Grisi in Schubert's *Das Dreimäderlhaus* and Lisa in *The Land of Smiles* by Lehar; Amelia represented my first challenge in the true sense of the word.

My initiation in Verdi's musical world was aided by the expert advice of pianist Eva Debreczeni,¹² with the help of whom I managed to decipher even the most minuscule details of the musical language. From the standpoint of vocal approach, I have trained with Eva Trenka¹³, who taught me the process of expressing vocally the dramatic traits of a character, the manner in which a role should be constructed from a vocal standpoint bearing in mind the fact that Amelia was present on stage throughout all of the three acts.

The different approaches the role required made me develop a deep connection with the character on every possible level. These approaches altered from deeply lyrical – in portraying her hidden feelings, of a self caught in a complex dilemma – to deeply dramatic, such as the depiction of her maternal feelings, her fears for her own child, as well as the sorrow caused by the death of Riccardo.

The stage representation of the character depends on those crucial directorial indications. I have had the fortune of working with Zoltán Varga,¹⁴ who had his own personal view on the manner in which the opera should be staged. With the help of his guidance, I was able to render Amelia's emotions, feelings as well as the action of the opera easily and with a true sense of realism.

The premiere of the opera took place on March 16, 1974 and the performance was a great success. Every time I had the opportunity of singing the role of Amelia, I was set on adding even more depth to the character bit-by-bit, trying to perfect the role vocal from a vocal as well as dramatic standpoint.

The role of Amelia has taught me a great deal and also gave me the opportunity to get familiarized with Verdi's inner world, the inner world of a great composer who concerned himself with giving his female characters the same importance as he did his male ones, making them an intricate part of both the action as well as the emotional arch of every opera.

(Translated by Köpeczi Juliánna Erika)

¹² Debreczeni Éva, pianist – coach of the Hungarian Opera of Cluj-Napoca at that time.

¹³ Trenka Éva, (1922-2010) – Soprano of the Hungarian Opera of Cluj-Napoca from 1948.

¹⁴ Varga Zoltán, (1936, București) – director of the Hungarian Opera of Cluj-Napoca at that time.

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