

SIMON BOCCANEGRA

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SUMMARY. *Simon Boccanegra* is one of Verdi's most interesting operas. Its unusual mix between old and new elements makes it both innovative and loyal to the traditions of the 18th century. The new approach of the characters creates a completely new world, in which the person – with its psychological and emotional experiences dominates the stage. Simon Boccanegra was the inspiration behind the opera, this authentic historic figure acted as the backbone of a story, which has shocked so many people at its first premiere. In the next few pages, we will present the opera's path from start to finish, mixing in some personal elements that will give the tale a human perspective, from the view of someone who attempts to take on such a challenging role to find herself immersed in a wonderful, historical age as well as the composing genius of Verdi.

Simon Boccanegra is an opera written by Giuseppe Verdi that – despite the fact that it was written in 1856 – it is rediscovered with great admiration only at the middle of the 20th century. This sudden interest for one of Verdi's most loved operas, an opera that is present to this day on the opera stages of the world, is confirmed by not only the opera directors who long to bring back to life a theme that is ever present in today's society, but also by the singers who find themselves before a great challenge to capture and then loyally convey the composer's wonderful and most pertinent writing.

In the next few pages we will try to render both the historical and artistic side of the opera; its path from inspiration to actually creating a role in order to shine some light on one of the most complex musical genres - the opera.

The history of its origin

In the spring of 1853 Verdi was spending some time on his Sant' Agata estate. He would have wished for a quiet summer after personally supervising the many performances of *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*, but a project that he planned for years – *King Lear* – was constantly on his mind.

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He resumes his correspondence on this complex project with Antonio Somma² - the future librettist of *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Verdi was preoccupied throughout his life with the writings of Shakespeare, and so his has promised in 1846 to B. Lumley³ that he would compose an opera based on Shakespeare's *King Lear* for *Her Majesty's Theatre*⁴. They have even arranged that the lead role to be sung by Luigi Lablanche⁵, the renowned bass. Still, Verdi could not convince himself to start working on this project. In order to stop the never-ending correspondence between them on the same subject, Somma finally writes the libretto to *King Lear* in 1853. Verdi pays him for his service, but as he wasn't satisfied with the work, he goes over on several of his earlier musical hits. In the meanwhile, he is asked to write another opera – *Les Vespres siciliennes* - the first of his operas that will have its premiere in Paris.

A few days after his 40th birthday, in October 1853, Verdi goes to Paris, leaving his wife, Giulietta Strepponi, on the Sant' Agata estate. After E. Scribe⁶ handed him the libretto of his future opera - a libretto he had worked on with Charles Duveyrier⁷ - Verdi starts working on the opera throughout 1853.

Although he is not completely satisfied with Scribe's work, he will soon write four of the five acts. Rehearsals start. Scribe, offended, misses the rehearsals, as for the soprano – S. Crivelli – she disappears after a few days. This was the last straw for the composer, who writes an angry letter on January 3rd 1855 to Louis Crosnier⁸, the director of the *Opéra Comique*, condemning Scribe's attitude and asking to be let out of his contract.

² Somma, Antonio (1809-1864) was a lawyer who has made a name for himself as a poet and librettist. Verdi respected him especially for his abilities as a poet and for his patriotism.

³ Lumley, Benjamin (1811-1875) was the director of *Her Majesty's Theatre* in London in 1841.

⁴ A second theatre named this way in Westminster, London which opened in 1791, after the first original building burnt down; it was associated with opera performances, many of the London opera premieres taking place here, like Mozart's *Clemenza di Tito* (1806), *Così fan tutte* (1811) and *Don Giovanni* (1816), as well as Bizet's *Carmen* and Wagner's *Ring Cycle*.

⁵ Lablanche, Luigi (1794-1868) was a famous opera singer who even though came originally from a French family was born in Naples, where he later made his stage debut at the early age of 18, then came to be known elsewhere too signing important contracts with the Opera House from Palermo and *Scala* of Milan.

⁶ Scribe, Eugene (1791-1861) was an extraordinarily prolific playwright. He has often collaborated with other playwrights; he had a unique sense of theatre, he always knew what the audience wanted, while the dramatic structure of his plays still inspires playwrights today. He wrote many famous librettos, especially for the works of Auber and Meyerbeer.

⁷ Duveyrier, Charles, (1803-1866) was a French librettist who collaborated with E. Scribe on *Les Vespres siciliennes* by Verdi.

⁸ Crosnier, François-Louis was the director of the *Opéra Comique* in Paris starting with the year 1838.

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The composer would like to return to Italy to continue *King Lear*, but the Parisian Opera insists that *Les Vespres siciliennes* to be finished. This will turn out to be an unbelievable triumph not only in the eyes of public, but also to the critics. This opera will have been performed 50 times in the first season alone. The incredible triumph will ensure the libretto's speedy translation into Italian. The opera is performed under different names - due to the censorship – until the unification of Italy, when it returns to its original title. Verdi goes back to his estate where he continues to work on *Stiffelio* with Piave⁹, and in March 1856 goes to Venice to conduct a successful re-enactment of *La Traviata*.

Thanks to the remarkable triumph it had, *Teatro La Fenice* requests a new work that will have its premiere in the 1856/57 season. The work will be based on the play of the same Gutierrez¹⁰ who also inspired *Il Trovatore*.

Simon Boccanegra, the doge of Genoa from 1339, inspires the lead role, the man who not only wanted to unite the two parts of the city, but also the many regions of Italy. The topic sends an genuine political message if we take into consideration the political reality of the time, and its prophesying many clashes with the censorship.

In the year that Verdi composes *Simon Boccanegra* (1856), he has already written 21 operas – if we count every version. *Simon Boccanegra* is preparing to be a real success. The composer does not need a simple librettist, but a poet, someone who can willingly follow his every direction to the letter. However, since no poet is interested in writing an opera libretto in Italy, the person who will start writing it immediately will be once again Piave. Not that he would be an inspired innovator, but he is still a sensible man who is familiar with the theatre and is ready and able to follow Verdi's directions accurately. The first draft is returned to Piave with numerous corrections, notes and changes: "*If what happened is unpleasant for you believe me that it is more unpleasant for me, but the only thing I can say is that it was a necessity.*"¹¹

In 1856, Verdi, concerned not only with the writing of *Simon Boccanegra*, travels to Paris and London, where he oversees the French version of *Il Trovatore*. At his return to Sant' Agata at the beginning of 1857, *Simon Boccanegra* is far from being finished, and by the middle of February there is still an act missing together with the orchestration of the whole piece. The censorship interferes with the creative process, but Verdi stays firm in his belief and does not allow any changes to take place. He works continuously and finishes his work on time so there will be no impediments in the way of the premiere on the 12th of March at Teatro La Fenice.

⁹ Piave, Francesco (1810-1876) was an Italian librettist, Verdi's lifetime friend and collaborator.

¹⁰ Gutierrez, Antonio Garcia (1813-1884) was a great romantic Spanish playwright, is known especially for *El Trovador*, which served later as a starting point to Verdi's *Il Trovatore*.

¹¹ Luzio - Gesari: *I copialettere di G. Verdi*, Milano, 1935

Simon Boccanegra is doomed to have the fate of *La Traviata* in Venice. “I thought I have made something useful, but it seems I was wrong.”¹² - He writes his wife two weeks after the premiere. What happened?

Earlier, with *Rigoletto*, Verdi has taken an important step in revolutionizing the opera as a genre. He abandoned the traditional forms of the *aria* and *cabaletta* introducing the *gran scena* as well as the *misto* style – in which the *recitativo* and *aria* forms alternate and change structure. The first step in achieving this new direction was made by *Macbeth*, and with *Simon Boccanegra* Verdi continues to adopt the same philosophy. The maestro’s revelation that the traditional Italian opera is dead and that romanticism is over opposes the public’s opinion. The composer believes that his true purpose is to breathe life into his characters, to make them act in a realistic, convincing way, to present their inner turmoil in contrast with the strong political and psychological setting.

An opera that has this modern leading man cannot count on success from a public that does not understand why *Simon Boccanegra* does not even have a single *aria* or *romanza*, *stretta* or *cabaletta*. This audience cannot understand why the traditional love story should take a second chair to the personal and political conflicts that emerge throughout the opera. The lead character is a hopeless hero and from a dramatic standpoint *Simon Boccanegra*, the opera, is a complex human and political drama.

***Simon Boccanegra* - 30 years from start to finish**

At the time that Verdi decided to write *Simon Boccanegra*, in the summer of 1856, he had already established a name for himself, a name validated also by his latest romantic trilogy - *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*. His name is on the lips of everybody who is a member of the cultural circles in Italy and abroad.

The issues rose in *La traviata* and *Rigoletto* were most controversial at that time and both the public and the critics approached it with many reservations, noticing that this was a clear message that the composer parted with the traditional Italian opera music of the 18th century.

Verdi’s first loud critic on the matter was Basevi¹³. His criticism had an astoundingly accurate way of presenting a few basic features, essential characteristics of Verdi’s music. Basevi writes about one of these traits, namely about the “edgy” approach to some musical pieces – like the Nabucco march – in great contrast with Rossini’s “round” melodies.

¹² Luzio - Gesari: *I copialettere di G. Verdi*, Milano, 1935

¹³ Basevi, Abramo (1818-1885) was an Italian composer and musicologist, he was the musical editor of *L’Armonia* journal and author of *Studio sulle opere di G. Verdi; Introduzione ad Un Nuovo Sistema d’Armonia; Compendio della Storia della Musica*.

Therefore, seeing that Verdi at the time that he composed *Simon Boccanegra* was 40 years old and by the time of the adaptation 70 years old, we can safely say that this opera is like a synthesis of his work, a combination of his musical themes and his variety of different styles. It is a synthesis between the 1850s and finishing *Otello* along with *Falstaff*, then rewriting *Macbeth* as well as *La forza del destino*, also different versions of *Don Carlos* and *Aida*.

As we mentioned earlier, the story of *Simon Boccanegra* begins in the summer of 1856, when Verdi decides to write an opera based on the libretto written by Piave, inspired by the Spanish Antonio Garcia Gutierrez playwright's drama. The composer intended this work to have its premiere at *Teatro La Fenice* on March 12. Unfortunately, the opera was not a great success.

Verdi takes full responsibility for the fiasco. He writes to Princess Maffei¹⁴: "*Simon Boccanegra's failure is as great as La traviata's in its time. I thought I have created something suitable, or now I feel deceived.*"¹⁵ However, he does not back down, as it is shown in the letter he has written to his friend, Cesare Vigna¹⁶: "*Have the Venetians calmed down yet? Who would have thought that poor Boccanegra – may he be good or bad – could unleash inferno in this manner?*" The word *inferno* refers to the innuendos of some that say the libretto was actually written by the composer himself and not Piave. Nevertheless, Verdi sets the record straight by saying: "*I admit my ignorance, I am not perfect.*"¹⁷

Still, we can't deny that the opera has nearly vanished from the Italian repertoire. The cause may be either the unwillingness of the public to open up to something entirely new, or the obvious short endings of the opera itself, especially compared with the great success of the others.

In 1880 Verdi decides to rewrite this opera, which he never forgot, and in which he continues to believe. "*I will try to make the public accept this as it would a new piece.*"¹⁸ He starts by studying Piave's libretto, and then asks for Boito's¹⁹ help to introduce a few other scenes, as well as correcting some of the previous ones. Verdi's letter to Boito shows that he

¹⁴ Maffei, Clarina was a countess, the wife of the famous poet Andrea Maffei; she met Verdi at the premiere of *Nabucco* and they shared a lifelong friendship. The time's cultural and political life took place in the salon of Clarina Maffei, where people like Balzac, Liszt or Berlioz were regular guests.

¹⁵ Luzio: *Profili biografici e bozzetti storici II*, Milano, Cogliati, 1927

¹⁶ Vigna, Cesare (1819-1892) was a Venetian psychiatrist, Verdi's longtime friend, who later publishes a book that studies the moral and psychological effect of music on the human nervous system.

¹⁷ Luzio - Gesari: *I copialettere di G. Verdi*, Milano, 1935, page 553.

¹⁸ Luzio - Gesari: *I copialettere di G. Verdi*, Milano, 1935

¹⁹ Boito, Arrigo (1842-1918), Italian poet, journalist, novelist and composer, best known for his opera librettos and for his opera – *Mephistopheles*

asks the musician-poet to totally renew the second part of the first act, introducing a few scenes that take place inside Senate or the San Siro temple. “*Your idea regarding the temple scene is excellent. It is fresh and it brings something new to the story both musically and dramatically, it is beautiful but it would make me go to too much trouble and sadly, we should let it go and solely rely on the scene from the Senate, which I’m sure will hold it’s own, thanks to your genius. Your critique is justifiable, but still you are setting the stakes to high and expect perfection, a perfection that is unfortunately impossible to attain from here. I do not have such great ambitions, and being an optimist, I will not lose hope. Admittedly, the table is trembling, but I am confident that after its legs will be fixed it will hold up. Maybe this opera does not have the most unusual characters, still I believe that both Simon’s and Fiesco’s character reveals unexpected, hidden emotions. Finally, let us try to make the ending the most theatrical it can be. If all this agrees with you, then start composing. I will try my best to straighten the crooked legs of our melodies, and then we will see.*”²⁰

Boito engages in correcting the libretto, following the maestro’s directions. Soon Paolo borrows a few traits from Iago, and Verdi entirely transcribes the ending of the first act while shortening the *cabalettas* and *arias*. The opera’s structure advances and grows into a whole, more explicit and more solid, putting an emphasis on the political background that was so modest the first time. The original love story could not be considered the opera’s core, and maybe that is why the public did not embrace it at first. The male characters - now spared by the traditional *ornaments* – are driven by their political aspirations contrasting with the traditional way, when they were subject to their heart’s desire. The opera revolves around the drama of the responsible, civically engaged man, who is preoccupied with his emotions and his responsibilities as a public servant, as well as on the individual versus the masses, on the individualistic ideal opposed to the overwhelming passion of the masses.

This new rendition of the opera is presented to the public on the 24th of March 1881 at Teatro Alla Scala in a triumphal success, conducted by Faccio²¹ and casting D’Angeri²², Tamagno²³ and Maurel²⁴ in the lead

²⁰ Alberti: *Verdi Intimo*, Milano, 1931

²¹ Faccio, Francesco (1840-1891) was an Italian composer and director born in Verona. In 1867 he became the head of the Conservatoire of Milan, then in 1872 the director of the *Teatro Alla Scala* also in Milan. He is the one who conducts the premieres of Verdi’s *Aida* (1872) and *Otello* (1887) as well as the revision of *Simon Boccanegra*.

²² D’Angeri, Anna was a renowned soprano of the time; she created the Amelia Grimaldi/Maria Boccanegra role.

²³ Tamagno, Francesco (1850-1905) the most famous dramatic tenor of the time, was one of Verdi’s role creators - *Otello*.

²⁴ Maurel, Vittorio (1848-1923) was an Italian baritone; Verdi created Iago and Falstaff having him in mind.

roles. Undoubtedly, Verdi's fame reached a new height with this amazing accomplishment.

Verdi conveys his contentment in a letter to his friend, Oppradino Arrivabene²⁵: "*Even though it's the evening of the premiere, I write to you knowing that I've managed to fix old Boccanegra's legs. Tonight's triumph strengthens that belief.*"²⁶

The love story portrayed in the opera remains introductory at best and only that. Moreover, if we look at the opera from a strictly musical standpoint, then we will notice a link between the part where Simon tells the story about his daughter's disappearance and some folkloric influences in *Il trovatore*. The "*Oh, de' Fieschi implacata, orrida razza*"²⁷ sentence throws us back to the past, especially to *Rigoletto*. The ending of the prologue is remarkable from the point of view of the stage, offering a genuine surprise to the audience, while its musical score has a mannerist influence. A few melodic fragments follow, that remind us of *Il trovatore*, and the singing voice from afar - at the beginning of the first act - is reminiscent of Manrico's first appearance.

The political events are an integrant part of the characters psychological state of mind. Amelia's encounter with the doge makes us recall the passionate setting of *Rigoletto*, though in this case the music has a darker dynamic palette. The incredible force of the masses is illustrated in the Senate scene, where by using a high tonality; the composer creates an amazingly vibrant atmosphere.

Thus, we arrive to the extraordinary scene 10, the Senate scene. This is where the unbelievable, unleashed power of the mass takes the scene to a different level. Verdi uses a higher tonality for the more dramatic scenes, therefore aiding the delicate self-analysis of the characters. We can easily draw a parallel between Otello and Boccanegra, as well as Iago and Paolo, especially if we take into consideration the sombre dialogue between Boccanegra and the bass clarinet, a sequence that introduces the "*Sia maladetto*"²⁸ aria. This part remains one of Verdi's most eloquent musical illustrations of utter fear and panic. Iago's suspicious character is clearly depicted at the beginning of the second act, in Paolo's monologue - "*Me stesso ho maladetto*".²⁹ With this starts the downfall of these two characters. Verdi transposes the ominous, disturbing, unsettling musical

²⁵ Arrivabene, Oppradino (1805-1887) was an Italian count, journalist to the first daily newspaper in Milan - *Indicatore Lombardo*, as well as an art lover who also actively participated in the political life of the time.

²⁶ Alberti: *Verdi Intimo*, Milano, Mondadori, 1931

²⁷ "*Oh, unyielding Fiescos, you horrible race!*"

²⁸ "*You be cursed!*"

²⁹ "*I have cursed myself*"

portray of his characters using just recitativos, thus showing the incredible force of this generally understated style. The second act finale impresses with its colorful orchestral sound; Simon's "*Me ardon le labra*"³⁰ aria describes a frightening and febrile atmosphere also emphasized by the dreadful pizzicatos of the bass. At the beginning of the third act a new surprise emerges, the sight of the sea intensifies Simon's hallucinations after taking the poison. It is most remarkable how the composer illustrates the mysterious power of nature which subsequently becomes an organic part of human drama.

The final scene of the opera revolves around the voice of the people. Its almost religious approach reminds us of the "*La vergine dell'angel*"³¹ from *La forza del destino*. We can observe old and new elements coming together to form this last scene; a touching testimony to the composer's hunger for peace, harmony and understanding, still never letting go of his political hopes, that one day – as in the opera itself – there would be possible to reunite those conflicted.

The Fiesco Palace

This omnipresent "*palazzo dei Fieschi*"³² serves not only as a mere prop on stage, it is much more than that. Every scene of the opera happens in front of the palace, therefore due to its permanent presence it acts as a symbol of the past – the prologue if you will – throughout the opera. It is the ever fixed reminder of the past, giving the audience a sense of time and space by simply being there.

The palace is very much similar to a silent character that is used to build tension between the acts we do see in front of the edifice and those that happen inside the mysterious palace. It is beyond the walls of the palace that Boccanegra finds out Maria had died, leaving just Fiesco's detailed description to aid us in imagining the moment.

The Fiesco palace has three main functions. Primarily its compact, impenetrable facade symbolises the rigid, unyielding way of the Fiesco family, Jacopi Fiesco's attitude, which due to his prejudice puts the family honor ahead of his daughter's life. The dark, somber depiction of the palace's image appears as early as in the middle of the orchestral prologue. Although Paolo's prologue is essentially a monologue in which he blames the Patricians³³, together with the Fiesco family, the monologue turns into a dialogue given that he talks directly to the palace, a building that to him

³⁰ "*My lips are burning*"

³¹ "*A virgin among angels*"

³² "*the palace of the Fiesco's*"

³³ The term "*patrician*" originally referred to a group of elite families

represents the personified enemy. By giving such importance to a plain building, Verdi is making the palace into one of the most defining characters of the opera, “*who*” will later witness silently the lives of the other characters. The second capacity in which the composer uses the palace is as a magnificent, cold tomb. Both Paolo and Simon refer this way to the palace: “*prigioniera geme in quella magion*”³⁴. And then later Fiesco calls it “*Palagio altero, freddo sepolcro dell’angiolo mio*”³⁵, therefore the palace is always linked to Maria, as it is first her prison, then later her tomb.

It’s interesting to hear Verdi’s description of the Doria palace from Genoa, where the composer spent the winter months of 1874. Most likely it was the image of this palace that inspired him later to create the Fiesco family’s palace. “*I had the perfect scene imaginable in front of my eyes for the fifth scene in a drama. A palace which elongates to the sea, and has white marble columns reflecting in the water. The structure appears to be completely abandoned and its solitude moved me. From where I was standing it seemed to be a sort of immense tomb where shadows of past rulers rest surrounded by the gentle hush of waves and orange trees.*”³⁶

Finally, Fiesco’s aria, in which he mourns his daughter, gives the palace a sort of sacred impression; it transforms it in a temple, in a temple where the requiem hums for Maria. We hear a women’s choir from the back of the stage singing a *capella*, saying “*she’s dead*”, words that seem unreal, heavenly – not unlike some similar scenes from *Faust* or *Parsifal*. The can observe the same antithesis between the outer – with Fiesco in front of the palace – and inner space - Maria’s dead body inside the palace. The sacrosanct character of the palace is enhanced by the men’s choir, who sing *miserere* in a style that resembles the song of monks.

In the prologue, *Palazzo dei Fieschi*³⁷ is the core around which the events wove. Even if the characters periodically leave the stage, they sooner or later come back to it, lured there by its incredible magnetism, for the palace is the center of the story – may it be in a direct or indirect fashion.

At the beginning of his aria, Fiesco speaks directly to the palace, the symbol that means so much for the honor of his family, being also the place of his daughter’s death. And in the end, for Simon, the palace represents the home of his loved one, the place that pulls him closer every time, the place in which he entered much too late – at the end of the prologue. The hidden connections or obvious ties between the cold, rigid castle and the characters reveal its importance not only as a stage element, but also as a reference point in integrating the dramatic character of the prologue - a true miniature opera.

³⁴ “[*Maria*] as a prisoner, she moans inside the palace”

³⁵ “*Majestic palace, my angel’s cold tomb*”

³⁶ Alberti: *Verdi Intimo*; Milano, Mondadori, 1931

³⁷ “*the palace of the Fiesco’s*”

Power and Self-destruction – Genoa in the Time of *Simon Boccanegra*

Genoa reaches its peak in the second half of the 18th century. Its road to prosperity is marked by three historical dates: 1261 – the fall of the Byzantine Empire; the victory of the Genoese people at Meloria against the people of Pisa and finally 1298 – the victory of the Genoese people at Curzolari against the Venetians. In the next period Genoa went through several more riots, which always ended in the rise of either one or the other main party. Venice had to rely mostly on the party intrigues rather than on its own army.

The Doria and Spinole families led the Ghibelline party at the time of the Venetian wars, while the Grimaldi and Fiesco families led the Guelph party. The titles Guelph and Ghibelline were not labels, but names that showed reference to party beliefs, or to the party's loyalty either to an emperor or the Pope. It was rather important that these parties be led by such fiery personalities, it helped to give the entire party much needed moral – if not financial – help. The names were also an asset for the leaders in the political tactics. The ambition and will to rule of each party fueled the political confrontations. In Genoa's case, while we know that the Fiesco and Grimaldi families stretched out from one shore of the Adriatic to the other, and also in Liguria, along with the Doria and Spinola families, who owed their fortunes to sea trading and financial transactions, it is rather difficult to determine exactly the original causes that led to the longtime feud between the Doria and Fiesco families.

German emperor, Henrik the VIIth of Luxembourg (1308-1313), who came from Italian descent, was the person chosen for signore in Genoa. After his death many battles took place for the occupation of the land, until the 1336 signing of the peace treaty that stated that Corsica will be Genoa's property and Sardinia will belong to the Catalans. Genoa's political life turns rapidly unstable and in 1339 the Bourgeois rebel groups along with some groups led by peasants drove out the nobility from Genoa, and would not allow them to take public offices.

Simon Boccanegra, descendent of a wealthy family, is elected doge in September 1339. After driving away the nobility – a category considered being the main cause and civil war – Boccanegra decides to strengthen the republic, an effort that will be his main goal in office, only the political scene was not quite tamed. Since most of the land as well as the sea access were controlled by the nobility, Boccanegra had to face the fact that this temporary situation would not last for long.

In 1344 Boccanegra gives up his seat and moves to Pisa, he will later be reelected 1356 and he will rule for seven years until he is poisoned. The next elected leader chosen by the people will be Gabriele Adorno.

“You are much more familiar with our political realities than I, and the distance permits you to have a better judgment on the matter. I however am not satisfied – not necessarily because the left is in power – but because it lacks in capabilities. It is aggressive and its goal is to exclude, in the mean time it self-proclaims to be liberal.”³⁸

“Politics, an area with which you are better acquainted, do not concern me; I do not care to discuss such an unpleasant topic with you. Things are bad indeed throughout Europe, but most of all here. You are right: everybody is trying to become the next president or minister, still nobody is looking out for the homeland”³⁹

Simon Boccanegra becomes doge

The discontent escalades in Genoa, and some peasants from Volti requests the people’s resistance. The governing party, the Ghibellines, send Eduard Doria to ease the conflict. But Doria, threatened, surrounded by the rebels, finds refuge in the palace. The armed rebels drove away the aristocracy and they proclaimed the city to be under the power of the people. In order to make peace with the citizens, the aristocracy selected 20 men from the people who will later represent them in the elections. However, while the election process takes place inside the election hall, the crowd waits outside. An impatient goldsmith says that there needn’t be this much excitement about the whole thing, when they can choose their one doge right there in the square. Every important leader accepts this proposal, and in the next few minutes they elect the next doge from one of their own – this will be Simon Boccanegra.

The delegates run out of the election hall at the sound of commotion and cheering in the square. In order not to jeopardize their authority, they find it best to support the people’s decision. The crowd takes Boccanegra to the palace, where the *capitaneus* meetings take place. They make him sit beside the most important man there and name him the ruler. The ambitious Boccanegra uses this opportunity to make his statement. He lets everybody know about his intention to speak out, and to much of his surprise the people are actually interested in hearing the things he wanted to say. He states that even though he does not believe to be worthy of such an honor, he will accept the nomination in order to keep the political conflict from escalating once more. The crowd asks him to become the next doge, and carry him to his house, shouting “*Long lives our Doge!*” The town officials - fearing another riot – retreat to their homes. Since usually this sort of riots end in pillaging, the rebels prepare to force open the gates of the

³⁸ Letter written by Verdi to Ferdinand Hiller on January 26 1879, Genoa.

³⁹ Letter written by Verdi to Ferdinand Hiller on April 14 1879, Genoa.

aristocrats. In order to maintain the appearance of his authority, Boccanegra sentences the leaders of the pillagers. The severe measures insure the retreat of the people. After this power play, Simon Boccanegra orders the aristocrats into the town square, where he blackmails them into signing the official paper stating he *is* in fact the new doge.

The Story of 'Simon Boccanegra'

Prologue: The action begins in a square at night, where Simon agrees to be a candidate for Doge, or leader, of Genoa. He'll represent the commoners against in a contest against the candidate of the noblemen.

A lantern is lit at the nearby palace of a nobleman named Fiesco, who comes out of his home to confront Boccanegra. Fiesco says his daughter Maria has just died. Maria and Boccanegra had been lovers, but Fiesco never approved of Boccanegra and the two men became enemies. Boccanegra offers his sympathies, but Fiesco says Boccanegra can only mend their differences by turning over the daughter he fathered with Maria — Fiesco's grandchild. Boccanegra says his daughter has mysteriously disappeared.

The orchestra plays a beautiful, innocently soaring string theme as Boccanegra enters Fiesco's home, looking for Maria. He finds her body just as the crowd joyfully announces his election as Doge.

ACT ONE:

The drama resumes 25 years later. Boccanegra is still the Doge of Genoa and has gained enormous power. Outside the Palace of Genoa's wealthy Grimaldi family, we meet the young woman Amelia Grimaldi. Boccanegra has banished the Grimaldi sons for subversive activity. Amelia is in love with a young nobleman, Gabriele Adorno, who arrives to speak with Amelia's guardian. The guardian is actually Fiesco, Boccanegra's longtime enemy, now living under an assumed name. Boccanegra's advisor Pietro interrupts, saying the Doge himself is approaching and would like to visit Amelia. She agrees.

As Amelia suspected, Simon wants her to marry his associate Paolo, and he offers to pardon her brothers if she'll agree. She's grateful, but says she's in love with Adorno. Anyway, she tells him, she's not really a Grimaldi by birth. She was taken in as a foundling, after the old woman who was caring for her died.

Considering this, Simon produces a locket with a picture of Maria, his long-dead lover. Amelia has the same picture in her own locket — it's a picture of her mother, whom she never knew. They both realize that Amelia is Simon's own lost daughter, and Verdi gives them a reunion scene that rivals even his own masterpiece *Rigoletto* in its portrayal of love between father and daughter.

SIMON BOCCANEGRA

Boccanegra leaves and abruptly tells Paolo to forget about marrying Amelia. But Paolo's not going to bow out quietly. He and Pietro plot to kidnap Amelia before she can marry Adorno.

Next is the famous scene in the Doge's Council Chamber. A group of plebeians is admitted with a grievance. They've apprehended two noblemen — Amelia's lover, Adorno, and her guardian, whom Simon still doesn't recognize as Fiesco. It seems Adorno has killed a Plebeian leader. Adorno says the man he killed had tried to abduct Amelia, on the orders of "a powerful person." Adorno assumes the Doge himself ordered the kidnapping and draws his sword to assassinate Boccanegra. The Doge's men prevent this and Amelia begs Simon not to harm Adorno.

Boccanegra agrees, at least until the whole kidnapping matter is straightened out. This enrages Paolo, which puts Simon in a tricky, political situation. But the Doge has a psychological trick up his sleeve. He rightly assumes it was Paolo who actually ordered Amelia's abduction. So he pronounces a deadly curse on the supposedly unknown kidnapper and forces Paolo to repeat that curse. The act ends as the superstitious Paolo knowingly curses himself, while dreading the possible consequences.

ACT TWO:

Paolo is left in a sort of double jeopardy. He's afraid of the curse and of what the Doge will do when he finds out what's been going on. Paolo decides that his only way out is to kill Boccanegra.

Paolo knows he'll never keep his power if he's known to be the Doge's assassin, but he wants to be doubly sure of Simon's death. First, he puts poison into Simon's carafe of drinking water. Then he summons Adorno and Amelia's guardian Fiesco, who are both being held in the palace as plotters against the Doge. Paolo suggests that Fiesco might just want to sneak up on the Doge while he's asleep — and murder him. Fiesco refuses and returns to his cell.

Paolo then tells Adorno that Amelia is in the palace, visiting Simon, implying that the two are lovers. Adorno finds this plausible — he doesn't know that Simon and Amelia are actually father and daughter. He confronts Amelia. She refuses to reveal her true relationship to Simon and Adorno is convinced that she's betrayed him.

Meeting with Simon in private, Amelia asks him to give Adorno clemency in return for political support. Simon agrees and Amelia goes off to find Adorno.

Alone, Simon drinks the water that Paolo has poisoned and falls asleep. Adorno appears. Unaware of the deal Amelia made, he's intent on killing Boccanegra. Amelia stops him. In a dramatic trio, Adorno finds out that Amelia is Simon's daughter. He asks for the Doge's forgiveness and vows his loyalty.

ACT THREE: Fiesco has been freed, as part of the Doge's deal with Adorno, and is now in a position of power. Paolo has been taken into custody and tells Fiesco that he has poisoned the Doge. He also admits that he's the one who planned Amelia's abduction. For his trouble, he's hauled off in chains.

The Doge himself appears, still unaware that he's been poisoned. Fiesco reveals his true identity, as father of Simon's long-dead lover, Maria. Simon can now accept the peace that Fiesco offered as the opera began and reveals that Amelia is his daughter, and Fiesco's granddaughter. Fiesco and Simon are reconciled, and Fiesco tearfully tells the Doge that Paolo has poisoned him.

After blessing the love of Amelia and Adorno, Boccanegra names Adorno his successor and dies.

Giorgio Strehler⁴⁰: The Political and Human Drama. May Simon Boccanegra be Verdi's self-portrait?

Simon Boccanegra is one of Verdi's most complex dramas - a political and human drama, but especially a dialectic melodrama. It is considered usually to be a *traditional opera* precisely for this reason, growing into a uniquely interesting work. The modern characteristics of the opera are provided by the constant mixture of the private and political life of the characters.

The usual plot of stories written in that day consists of kidnappings, misunderstandings, troubling personal and historic conflicts, which are meant to impress the audience, for they reveal history shaped by people, ideas, success and failure. We can also find human conflicts in the opera. Viewed from a personal standpoint, the historical and political aspect becomes most important and believable. There is also a constant shift in power between the noblemen and the commoners. The masses – represented by the choir – become another character of the play in the final scene of the first act. All this is thank to the wonderful man of theatre, Boito. And Verdi's music comes to complete this work in some area where it may lack dramatic substance. The composer created a masterpiece in which all of the nuances of the political and psychological turmoil melt into one intensely perfect and deeply convincing story.

The constant duality between the individual and political aspirations of the characters is best illustrated by Simon Boccanegra's character. We could even go to the length that Simon Boccanegra is a reversed Boris Godunov. Both operas depict the drama of the human conscience. On one hand we have the tyrant who attains power through sin and then dies from

⁴⁰ Strehler, Giorgio (1921-1997) was one of the most influential Italian theatre and opera directors.

remorse, while on the other hand we have a man – Simon – who craves the power offered to him, tries to make justice for all, but dies in the process and hopes that his urge to reconciliation will be listened by the next generation. Simon Boccanegra is the drama of a good, sensible man, who is forever daunted by his idea of justice. Boccanegra, a hostage to a political situation, tries to validate an essential idea – the political unification of Italy.

Verdi draws himself in Boccanegra; Simon has many of the composer's traits, such as his efforts made for the unification of Italy, as well as enduring pain caused by the loss of his children. In a troubled world, where people devour each other, Simon is *evil enough* to become the ruler of the world. Seeking the truth, he finds himself asking more and more questions. His mediation before falling asleep – in act three - is filled with bitterness. He cannot decide what to do with the names of those condemned – should he acknowledge the accusations or should he pardon them? The same tragic dilemma comes before him when he has to choose between sentencing or pardoning Gabriele Adorno. We have to admit that his gentle pacifism is not normal for a man of power. The last act sees him disgusted by his power and from his aria we find out that he had given up – not because he could not exercise his power – but because of his failure to do justice. Simon and Fiesco's last dialogue is most troubling both musically and emotionally. This musical interaction between the two men, who have known each other all of their lives, leaves us with a sense of acceptance, with the resignation of death being inevitably an integrant part of nature.

Ezio Frigerio⁴¹: Out of the depth of the sea

'I believe Verdi's music must be listened without conditions. His unique world has to be embraced without reflection, judgment or historical association; it has to be looked at as the romantic dimension of passion, which – not unlike a diagrammatic story – gives life to the space where the opera takes place.

This musical drama's verdiesque world has to be relived and its images have to be conveyed without consideration to today's audience, who has significantly drifted away from these romantic stories. It is necessary to have the Italian folklore as a source of inspiration, which may not be perfect, but it has some imposing, magnificent landscapes. We need to draw ideas from the intense nuances of the folklore, the simple approach, and use the obvious inadequacies of the dialectical anachronisms. Then, we should coordinate all these elements not trying to over complicate the whole process; we should simply direct the opera without unnecessarily forcing any modern approach. All the material needed to direct or adapt is already there within the work.

⁴¹ Frigerio, Ezio (1930-) world famous Italian costume designer.

Starting from these simple principles, my buildings come from a far away land, covered with mould and moss as if they were dragged out from the bottom of the sea; palaces in the size of cathedrals, which are supported by gothic pillars that give the impression of a homogeneous, vertical, monotone rhythm.

Behind them there is always the sea, with the fishermen's boats and sailor's ships. The costumes suggest two different worlds – the artists who sit on golden chairs, wearing purple clothes and the people who storm the stage like human waves wearing the strong, lively colors of the sea. At the end of the opera, when the dying Simon recalls his sailor days, it is precisely the sailor people who honor him by raising the great Latin sail in order to darken the clear blue sky.'

Graffiti – Verdi: A conversation with Gian-Carlo del Monaco⁴²

'I could direct Macbeth every year ten years in a row, as well as Simon Boccanegra. They are magnificent operas. Anytime I hear someone talking about their discovery, it always makes me smile thinking they have just revealed their own ridiculous perception about this opera, for they do not have to be discovered, because they were never lost. But then again they are not "tenor operas", and even though they possess two admirable tenor roles, the story does not orbit around the tenor like in Il trovatore. I would hardly consider Il trovatore superior to Simon Boccanegra, it's just Il trovatore is much more direct, it is approached in an al fresco manner. In my opinion Simon Boccanegra is a more mature piece, along with Macbeth.

Simon Boccanegra's story happens in the early renaissance. This era had a remarkable influence on any Italian who was preoccupied with culture or theatre. But then a question rose: how would I go about depicting this era on stage? One thing was certain – I would not transpose Petrarca's era on stage. From a political standpoint, renaissance was a cruel era; freedom of expression was extremely dangerous. The political power struggle reached new heights. Small states, countries and republics were at the bottom of the social stratification, followed by the rulers, and ending with the Pope on top.

Verdi and Boito resurrect Petrarca's frightening prophecy, and the illustrious figure of Cola di Rienzi. The conflicted people of Genoa could face the same fate that was bestowed on the people of Rome by Cola di Rienzi. Verdi uses this opera situation to express his own conception about the unification of Italy. The unification, the revolution is the most important thing for him. There are two narrative threads in the opera: in the first, Boccanegra is the central figure, the man who tries to unify the country in a

⁴² Monaco, Gian-Carlo del (1943-) world famous opera director, the son of the renowned tenor Mario del Monaco.

democratic government relying on a strong base provided by the people. But this vision has a fantastic reference, a paradox – in order to attain his goal he must become the dictator, following the classic pattern of Rome, which leads us to the magnificent image from the opera, an almost roman monument resurrected in a neoclassical manner.

The costumes reflect the early renaissance. The strength and aesthetics of renaissance – which manifests itself so lively in art and architecture, bears a very specific resemblance to the remote and to the recent past.

But the heights of power and art carry within themselves the signs of weakness and early decadence. An era what coincides with as much crimes as power is a weak era. We give up demonstrating on stage the either side of this age.

We have to let ourselves be taken by the severe aesthetic silence that signifies power. The other narrative thread me mentioned earlier is Verdi and his own era, the *Risorgimento*. The word *Risorgimento* means resurrection, and in the political and historical view of the time, it meant the rise and unity of Italy. There are many powers competing for a slice of the Italian cake. Verdi's name became the symbol of liberty and unity, and was written on the walls of buildings.

Viva Verdi – Viva Vittorio Emmanuelle Re d'Italia⁴³, this was the graffiti of the Austrian persecuted Italian *Risorgimento*.

I am convinced that if Italy would ever be occupied again, Verdi's name would reappear on the same walls. ‘

The Musical Analysis of Amelia Grimaldi

The musical definition of Amelia Grimaldi is almost identical to the one of Gabriele Adorno. Their characteristic melodies are dominated by some *barcarola* formulas, typical to the baroque.

Ex. 1

Amelia *Cantabile*

Co - mein que st'o_ ra bru - na

The musical material for these two characters remained unaltered, therefore it represents very much of the original 1857 *Simon Boccanegra*. Their musical patterns stay the same in all of their duets; they do not differ

⁴³ “Long live Verdi!”

not even when Gabriele Adorno suspects Amelia to be unfaithful. It is perfectly natural that Amelia and Gabriele's melodies to be related in the first act, where they express the same feelings of love and passion.

Ex. 2

Cantabile

Ri - pa - rai tuo - i pen - sie - - - ri, ri -

dolcissimo *dim.* *pp*

pa - rai tuoi pen - sie - ri al por - to dell' a - mor,

Their melodic approach stays the same even in the duets of the second act, in which the dramatic twist could ask for a change in either of their view from a musical standpoint as well.

Amelia's character becomes more important than her lover's in the Senate scene. She will be the one who will take the lead of the *concertato* part after Simon Boccanegra's call for peace; she will be the one who will introduce the second climax point of the *concertato*. More than this, Verdi will end this scene with Amelia's voice, with her voice that sings *a capella*, thus using the simplest way to attain the desired effect, yet introducing the ideal of peace with this amazing voice.

Ex. 3

ppp

ah! - pa - - - ce!

Personal Impressions of the Role

Verdi's female roles represent the height of an opera singer's calling. The sheer amount of musical, vocal and dramatic knowledge you need to perfect such a role can help form the identity of the artist, it can influence the way she perceives the world around her. The dramatic roles I have sung – Amelia from *Un Ballo in Maschera*; Abigaille from *Nabucco*; Elisabeth of Valois from *Don Carlos* – and their psyche and motivations depict many of Verdi's own traits, show his values, the moral and ethical rules after which he guides himself, such as: justice – sometimes poetic; truth and compassion.

SIMON BOCCANEGRA

Amelia Grimaldi is one of Verdi's leading ladies that bring a breath of color among the other female roles. Where as the aforementioned roles can be characterized by an overwhelming dramatic feel, Amelia Grimaldi is a lyrical role defined by her ingénue attitude. She symbolizes innocence, brightness from the first time she steps on the stage. While the plot of the opera is mostly dominated by political conflicts, family feuds, treason, mutiny, Amelia remains the stable element in the opera, she exudes moral cleanliness and is used by the composer to act as a moral compass for the others. The lyrical parts of Amelia's melodies express the burning desire to be with her beloved – Gabriele Adorno – to make peace between her father and Gabriele, and finally to unite all the people disregarding their differences.

In approaching this role, I had to consider Amelia's more subtle traits, especially in comparison with Abigaille (*Nabucco*) or Amelia (*Un Ballo in Maschera*). I have made the role my own with the enormous help from the pianists' with whom I've worked. Since the director's take was crucial in the dramatic understanding of the role, I have had the honor of working with a wonderful director, Kürthy András⁴⁴, who has taken Amelia, and together with the other characters, put together in immense puzzle. Besides the characters, the costumes, scenery and props were the elements that helped create the whole picture.

The national premiere of *Simon Boccanegra* took place April 30 1992, in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and had an unbelievable success. After many more performances throughout the years, we took it to the International Bartók + Verdi Opera Festival at Miskolc, Hungary in 2001.

Even though Amelia may be the exact opposite of Verdi's leading ladies that I was used to up until then, I thought it is absolutely fascinating the way Verdi uses the symbolism of the role. This apparently subtle aspect made me appreciate the role on a whole different level.

(Translated from Romanian by: Köpeczi Juliánna Erika)

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⁴⁴ Kürthy, András, world renowned opera conductor, was on the staff of La Scala of Milan, was one of Pavarotti's impresarios and organized many of the Three tenors concerts all over the world.

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