

# Verdi and *Nabucco*

When Verdi was in his late twenties, he suffered an appalling calamity: his two young children and then his wife all died within a short space of time, and he was left in complete desolation. Never were Macduff's words on the slaughter of his wife and children so apt:

"...All my pretty ones?  
Did you say all?...  
What! All my pretty chickens and their dam  
At one fell swoop?  
...Did heaven look on,  
And would not take their part?"

Verdi's immediate reaction to this disaster was to want to abandon composition, especially when his second opera, *Un giorno di regno* failed. It had been a comedy, written in the depths of despair. But time healed the emotional wounds and he went on to write *Nabucco*. In 1879 Verdi was persuaded by his publisher and friend Giulio Ricordi to dictate his recollections of his early years, amongst which was an account of the creation of *Nabucco* (originally called *Nabucodonosor*).

Verdi recorded that, with his mind tormented by domestic tragedy and embittered by failure, he had resolved never to compose again. He asked the impresario at La Scala, Merelli, to release him from his contract. Merelli treated him like a capricious child, refusing to allow him to be discouraged by the failure of one opera. However, Verdi insisted and, at last Merelli gave him the contract back, saying that while he couldn't force Verdi to compose, his faith in him was undiminished. If he decided in the future to compose again, and gave two months notice before the beginning of the season, Merelli would stage his next opera.

Some time later, Verdi encountered Merelli in the street. The latter said he was having difficulty over a new libretto that Nicolai had rejected. 'Just think,' said Merelli, 'a libretto by Solera! Stupendous! Magnificent! Extraordinary! Effective, grandiose dramatic situations and beautiful verses!' He pressed it on a reluctant Verdi, who offered to give up for Nicolai another libretto previously offered to him - *Il proscritto*. Ironically, *Il proscritto* turned out to be a flop and *Nabucco*, the opera Nicolai had rejected, became an enduring favourite.

According to Verdi, when he reached home he threw the manuscript on the table with a violent gesture, and stood staring at it. It had fallen open at a page with the line *Va, pensiero, sull' ali dorate* – 'Fly, my thought, on golden wings'. He glanced at the following verses and was deeply moved, particularly since they were almost a paraphrase of the Bible.

Although Verdi tried to drive the work from his mind, it kept running through his head, preventing him from sleeping. He got up and read the libretto several times, so that by morning he almost knew it by heart. Even so, he was resolved not to do anything with it and soon returned with it to the theatre.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' said Merelli.  
'Very beautiful' replied Verdi.  
'Well then, set it to music.'  
'Certainly not. I wouldn't think of it.'  
'Set it to music! Set it to music!'

And with that, Merelli stuffed the libretto in Verdi's coat pocket, pushed him out into the corridor and locked the door in his face.

The opera was duly written and Verdi went again to see Merelli, who declared himself ready to keep his word about performing it, but suggested that it should be put off until the following season, because he already had three new operas by better-known composers. Verdi opposed any delay because he knew that he would not find better artists than Strepponi (Abigaille) and Ronconi (Nabucco) who were then available. However, when the programme bills were posted, *Nabucco* was missing from the list! He wrote a fiery letter to Merelli – one that he regretted the moment it had been sent. Merelli sent for him and asked if that was any way to write to a friend, but he agreed, *Nabucco* would be staged. However, he could not afford new sets and would have to use whatever was available in the warehouse – in fact he used sets prepared in 1838 for the ballet *Nabucodonosor* by Cortesi. Verdi agreed, and the first performance took place on 9 March 1842. The opera was a huge success from the outset, leading Verdi to remark: 'With this opera it is fair to say my artistic career began'.

The audience applauded the first scene in the temple for ten minutes, and they went wild after the third act chorus *Va, pensiero*, insisting on its being repeated even though the law in Milan prohibited encores, which too often became vehicles for anti-Austrian demonstrations. It was easy for the Milanese governed by Austrians to identify with the Jews suffering under the Babylonian yoke. They made the connection – vociferously.

No one was more surprised than Verdi to find that he had suddenly become the composer of the *Risorgimento*.