

## II. PRAYERS OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN GIUSEPPE VERDI'S OPERAS. GISELDA'S PRAYER: SALVE MARIA FROM VERDI'S *I LOMBARDI ALLA PRIMA CROCIATA*

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**SUMMARY.** With this analysis the author continues the journey of presenting the prayers of female protagonists from Giuseppe Verdi's operas, a lesser-known topic within the vast bibliography dedicated to the *oeuvre* of the great Italian Maestro. *Giselda's Prayer* from *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* is the second – and an unusually modern example for Verdi's early period – in 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 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, *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, Giselda, aria, analysis

### 1. The synopsis of the opera and its prayers

Verdi's opera that chronologically followed *Nabucco* – and that debuted on February 11, 1843, just 11 months away from the latter<sup>3</sup> – is equally rich in prayers as its precursor, including a significant number of solo, choral and ensemble prayers.

The topic of *I Lombardi* invites such musical examples as prayers, as was the case with *Nabucco*, due to its storyline, that is set during the Crusades. Here is a brief description of the story:

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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> Teodor Niță, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

Two Milanese brothers, Arvino and Pagano, loved the same young woman, Viclinda. She chose Arvino as her husband, for which Pagano wanted to kill his brother. After returning from exile [18 years have past since then], Pagano is welcomed with open arms by his brother, but he only pretends to feel regret and remorse over what had happened. Pagano wants to take his revenge on his brother the first chance he gets, but ends up accidentally killing his father instead of his brother. When he realizes what he has done, Pagano wants to commit suicide, but is stopped before he achieves his goal. A few months later we find Arvino leading the Lombard Army during the Crusades, and his daughter being taken hostage by the tyrant of Antioch, Acciano. The tyrant's son, Oronte, falls in love with the young woman. While chasing the Muslims during a battle, Arvino and his men free Giselda from the harem in which she was held captive. However, she is unhappy with this turn of events, since she is also in love with the young Muslim Oronte. She then sneaks out of her father's tent to meet with Oronte, who then gets seriously injured. She takes him into a hermit's cave, so that he can be baptized in the water of the river Jordan before his death and thus become a Christian. The Crusader army defeats the Muslims, Arvino finds his daughter and recognizes the hermit as being his long lost brother, Pagano.<sup>4</sup>

If we were to make a comparison between *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi*, we would need to admit that there are many similarities between the two works. The location of the world premiere (Teatro alla Scala), the libretto signed by the same author (Themistocle Solera who drew his inspiration in creating the libretto from Tommaso Grossi's poem that bears the same title), "*Risorgimento* type"<sup>5</sup> nationalistic elements as well as the emphasized role of the choir,<sup>6</sup> stage band, three role creators in common (Prosper Derivis - Pagano, Gaetano Rossi - Pirro, Napoleone Marconi - Prior of Milan). Moreover, the same enthusiasm with which the work was received: in fact, the aim of writing this piece was - as stated musicologist Várnai Péter - "to repeat the success of *Nabucco*"<sup>7</sup> – a goal set out and attained by Verdi.

However, not everyone was thrilled with the new work, for *I Lombardi* led – to our knowledge – to the first clash of the composer with that era's censorship. Its cause was precisely the religious character of the text. The archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Gaetano Gaisruck was outraged by the text of the work, since it describes a series of processions, churches, the valley of Jehoshaphat, a conversion, a baptism and, consequently, he

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<sup>4</sup> Kertész Iván, *Operakalauz*, ed. Fiesta-Saxum © 1997 Kertész Iván, pp. 397-398.

<sup>5</sup> Várnai Péter, *Verdi operakalauz*, ed. cit., p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

had alerted the police chief.<sup>8</sup> The latter, Verdi's sympathizer, had asked only for a minuscule change, at the very beginning of Giselda's prayer which is the topic of our analysis – he asked that the original Ave Maria be turned into *Salve Maria*.<sup>9</sup> (As a curiosity, we suggest that if you ever be fortunate enough to see the manuscript of the work, look closely to the text correction made on the score by the composer, who added the letters S and I to the original *Ave Maria* text...)<sup>10</sup>

This prayer occurs during the first act of the opera, as the second of many prayers present within the work. In the first act, however, another prayer also occurs (*A te nell'ora infausta*), an interesting one by the very fact that it is being sung from backstage<sup>11</sup> mimicking the acoustics and sound of a song that is sung from the back of a basilica, where nuns pray by singing (mostly) *a cappella*.

The second act of the opera brings forth yet another example of a prayer, singular yet. The third scene depicts Giselda in a harem in Antioch, where she is being held prisoner. In her desperation, she prays to her late mother, and with this aria (*O madre dal cielo*) Verdi ends his second act, in an unusual way this time, by composing a final rondo-finale<sup>12</sup> instead of the usual ensemble places at the end of an act.

We find our heroine on her "knees" again, praying, for she has yet again lost the love that she found: Oronte gets seriously wounded after the two find each other... Then, in an act of desperation, Giselda holds God accountable for all the undeserved hardships: He left her without her mother, condemning her to being alone; and now He remands her lover's life<sup>13</sup> ... The music to which Giselda conveys her "complaint" is different from what we have seen thus far: she speaks to the Almighty while other two characters are engaged in parallel textual discourses, but all having converging scores within the same trio.

The last prayer of the *I Lombardi* opera is also the most famous one. The *O Signore dal tetto natio* (Act IV, Scene 2) choir, tailored to fit the model of *Va, pensiero*, had almost beat its popularity<sup>14</sup> during Verdi's time. While today, even if *I Lombardi* is considered to be more of a curiosity than

<sup>8</sup> Francesco Izzo, *Verdi, the Virgin and the Censor: The Politics of the Cult of Mary in I Lombardi alla prima crociata and Giovanna d'Arco*, in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Toamna 2007), p. 561.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed.cit., p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Giuseppe Verdi, *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, reprinted by Edwin F. Kalmus, Miami, n.d., p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

anything else, since it is rarely staged within opera houses around the world, this choir is part of the choral repertoire, as it is a mandatory piece often sung in concerts by opera or philharmonic choirs.

Other scenes also aid in making up the opera's strong religious character: Oronte's procession and baptism in Act III, then the vision appearing in the last act, in which it Oronte appears to Giselda in a dream. All these examples are anchored in Christian religion, despite the fact that the work displays two facets of the Abrahamic religions, namely Christianity and Islam.

## 2. *Salve Maria* (Act I, Scene 6)

Giselda's Prayer in the first act of the opera is, in our view, a new stage of development in Verdi's dramatic thought. It is the first example of the *Angelic salutation*<sup>15</sup> (*Ave Maria - Hail Mary*) and other prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary in a long series of works that will be composed within the next decades.

However, our example does not intend to follow the Catholic canon, being a mere paraphrase<sup>16</sup> of the famous addresses to the Virgin Mother recognized by Catholic catechism as "the most common prayer after the *Our Father*".<sup>17</sup>

### The *Ave Maria* Prayer (Latin, Italian, English):

*Ave Maria, gratia plena,  
Dominus tecum,  
benedicta tu  
in mulieribus,  
et benedictus fructus  
ventris tui, Iesus.  
Sancta Maria, mater Dei,  
ora pro nobis peccatoribus,  
nunc et in hora  
mortis nostrae.  
Amen.*

*Ave, Maria, piena di grazia,  
il Signore è con te.  
Tu sei benedetta  
fra le donne  
e benedetto è il frutto  
del tuo seno, Gesù.  
Santa Maria, Madre di Dio,  
prega per noi peccatori,  
adesso e nell'ora  
della nostra morte.  
Amen*

*Hail Mary, full of grace.  
Our Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou  
among women,  
and blessed is the fruit  
of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners,  
now and at the hour  
of our death.  
Amen.*

<sup>15</sup> Francesco Izzo, *op.cit.*, p. 561.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Catholic catechism*, source: <http://www.catholicplanet.com/catholic/hail.htm>, accessed on September 15, 2015.

The aria's text – paraphrasing the original prayer:

(*Te, Vergin santa, invoco*<sup>18</sup>)  
*Salve Maria! Di grazia il petto*  
*T'empie il Signor che in te si posa;*  
*Tuo divin frutto sia benedetto,*  
*o fra le donne l'avventurosa!*  
*Vergine santa, madre di Dio,*  
*per noi tapini leva preghiera,*  
*ond' Ei ci guardi con occhio pio*  
*quando ne aggravì*  
*l'ultima sera!*

(*I call thee, holy Virgin*)  
*Hail, Mary! Lord who dwells in you*  
*Grace fills your heart.*  
*Blessed is the fruit of thy womb,*  
*blessed are you among women!*  
*Holy Virgin ! mother of God,*  
*For our misery— oh, raise a prayer!*  
*And he will look down with holy looks,*  
*And not over-burden us*  
*to the last moment!*<sup>19</sup>

The text above of *Salve Maria*, lyrics that – as we have already observed – have passed through censorship before the premiere of the opera, is not, however, the only version that occurred during various stagings. In his analysis, Francesco Izzo mentions also other versions of the same text as they appeared during other stagings in various opera centers of Italy, whose main characteristic is that they increasingly depart from the original liturgical paradigm.<sup>20</sup>

The music that accompanies this text reflects the intimate atmosphere of her *private prayer* through the orchestration chosen by Verdi: the aria's instrumentation is characteristic of chamber music, the composer indicating in the general score just a flute, an A clarinet, eight violins and two violas, alongside a double bass. Older patterns already used by Verdi in *Nabucco* thus reappear: the use of the flute (the choral prayer in Part I) and the chamber music-type structure for the solo prayer (Zaccaria's prayer), a "general" harmonic support alongside the instrument(s) using arpeggios as a main mode of musical expression. The aria's sound, its atmosphere is much more similar to another prayer that had been written several years later: Desdemona's *Ave Maria* in *Otello* *Ave Maria*, as many analysts of Verdi's works rightly note. In this respect, it is surprising how Verdi, still at an early stage of his career, can conceive such a bold, modern aria, that can indeed be compared to a musical piece from one of his works written much later in time.

The parallel between the two *preghiere* not end with the musical aspect. The two characters, Giselda and Desdemona were praying to the

<sup>18</sup> The text of the brief invocation that precedes the aria.

<sup>19</sup> Translation: Juliánna Köpeczi from Mihaela Baciú's Romania version.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Francesco Izzo, *op. cit.*, p. 580.

Virgin Mary during the crucial moments of their existence. Both<sup>21</sup> sense an imminent tragedy – that's feminine intuition present(ed) within the opera. The analysis of the beautiful prayer sung by the Moor's wife during the climax of the opera will make the subject of another article. *Salve Regina*, however, as uttered by Giselda appears in the first act, before the *plot* begins and before Arvino's palace gets lit on fire, and the accidental killing of his elderly father, actions done by Pagano: the son, the brother, and uncle respectively of the three characters. Giselda, however, is not alone. Her mother, Viclinda, is the one who suggests – after having a bad premonition – to utter a prayer, promising that if she will be heard and the two will survive this night, they will make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in their bare feet.<sup>22</sup>

The *Salve Maria* prayer-aria is preceded by a short invocation, by which the heroine calls out to the Virgin Mary (*Te, Vergin santa, invoco!*), one that can be seen as reminiscent of the old recitativo and aria pair. What follows, however, is a typically romantic music, with a special arrangement, bold harmonic structures and unique formal conception.

We identified the formal concept that surrounds this aria as being a small three-part strophe, with an ample *coda* at the end (ABC + Coda).

The first musical period (A = a, m, c - 2+2+4 measures, three-phrase period) begins with the so-called angelic salutation (*Salve Maria!*), the greeting being very suggestively accompanied by a descending octave leap. Giselda then utters the following verses of the greeting, transposed in a simple, smooth, lyrical melody, with no large leaps (*andante, piano, con sordino* and *legato* are indicated, alongside *con commozione*,<sup>23</sup> to suggest the agitated state of the heroine). However, the accompanying harmonic discourse is bold, going from a D major – by a series of chromatic chords, favoring those of sevenths with diminished seventh chords – with a cadence in a far removed scale: C sharp major. The voice is in the forefront, while the strings are providing the doubling of the vocal line, as well as the harmonic setting. The flute and clarinet both play a special role in the fragment, instruments that play fugitive ascending arpeggios, as if their sound were sketching against the background of the incense smoke that rises towards the heavens together with her prayer.

<sup>21</sup> In fact, the bad omen is felt here by Giselda's mother, Viclinda.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.aria-database.com/search.php?sid=7f358fe034afdf70852793ff5cff55cb&fC=1&s0=salve+maria&f0=keyword&dS=ariadT=Compact&searching=yes&t0=all>, accessed on June 22, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> *Con commozione* = in an agitated manner

45 Andante

Fl.

Cl. in LA

Giselda

Sal - ve Ma - ri - a! di grazia il pet - to l'empie il Si -

45 Andante

Vni I.

Vni II.

Vlc.

Cb.

### The first measures of *Salve Maria*<sup>24</sup>

The following verses of the prayer (*Tuo divin frutto sia benedetto, o fra le donne l'avventurosa!*), bring forth the text of the Virgin's blessing. The scale shifts to F sharp minor, by way of C sharp major and b minor. The diminished chords with diminished sevenths (often associated with a feeling of pain, anguish) and the use of the harmonic f sharp minor with an extended second characteristic to oriental music (clarinet), are all means by which Verdi narrates the storyline on stage nonverbally.

The flute and clarinet are given ample roles, in a beautiful and unusual "accompanied monody" which, would have certainly pleased even Monteverdi. This new musical period (B - 8 measures, two-phrase period) accompanies her voice and by way of a tremolo in the string section, an effect that musicologist Julian Budden compares to a "morbid thrill"<sup>25</sup> when he was describing the accompaniment of *Viclinda's* prior recitativo and, which, behold, reappears yet again.

<sup>24</sup> Source of orchestral score and musical examples:

[http://japanese.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/2/22/IMSLP163618-PMLP55463-Verdi\\_-\\_I\\_Lombardi\\_alla\\_prima\\_crociata\\_-\\_Act\\_I\\_orch.\\_score\\_.pdf](http://japanese.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/2/22/IMSLP163618-PMLP55463-Verdi_-_I_Lombardi_alla_prima_crociata_-_Act_I_orch._score_.pdf), accessed on June 6, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed.cit., p. 121.

Fl. *pp* *solfavoce*

Cl. *pp* *solfavoce*

Giselda  
tu o di - - - - - frut - - - - - to si - - - - - a be.ne - det - lo,

Vni I. *pp* *stent.*

Vni II. *pp*

Vle. *pp*

Cb. *pp*

### B period – F sharp minor, antecedent

The begging of the prayer (*Vergine santa, madre di Dio, / per noi tapini leva preghiera, / ond' Ei ci guardi con occhio pio / quando ne aggravi l'ultima sera!*) suddenly returns to the original D major – we encounter here just one of the examples of using the third relationship that occurs in abundance in this aria. Giselda presents her request by two broad melodies within a three-phrase period (period C – phrases a av c, 4+4+9 meas.) reaching – through repetitions and sequences – the climax of the entire aria, both textually and musically. Giselda's request is accompanied by sighs, which symbolically appear by way of the two occurrences of the sigh motif, in parallel octaves played by the flute and clarinet.

Fl. *pp*

Cl. *pp*

Giselda  
Ver - gi - ne san - to, ma - dre di Di - o, per - noi ta - pi - ni

Vni I. *pp*

Vni II. *pp*

Vle. *pp*

Cb. *pp*

### The sigh motif and the beginning of period C



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The cadence that ends this supplication to the Virgin is notable because it will become one of the favorite composing tools of Verdi, "a bold side-slipping of unrelated chords"<sup>26</sup>.

E.g. 4

D: III# VI7# II9 V I  
# 7#  
#

**"A bold side-slipping of unrelated chords" towards the end of the prayer**

At the end of her aria, Giselda repeats the last two lines of the prayer in an extended *coda*. (Since it is a large fragment, this could also be interpreted as a last period: D. Due to the emergence of the pedal, however, which is a typical manner of ending a piece, we consider it to be a *coda*). The voice rises twice, repeating the same melody opposed by contrapuntal arpeggios at the wooden wind instruments, everything being

<sup>26</sup> Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed.cit., p. 121.

suspended on an ample D major pedal, accompanied by rich chromatic harmonies. Giselda ends her prayer with a short cadence, and the atmosphere of piety is extended in the second phase of the coda, a purely instrumental broadening, ended in a symbolic and rhetorical manner (as was Fenena's prayer), by way of the ascending arpeggios of the wind instruments. The fact that *I Lombardi* contains a prayer for the prima donna is probably due to the fact that Giselda is an innocent and pure young woman, a female character of "supreme kindness"<sup>27</sup> with a beautiful exterior and interior worthy of a positive romantic character. Her antipode is Pagano, who before his change and conversion is the embodiment of evil.<sup>28</sup> (This polarization of the characters appears also in opera, she being represented by the two "character pieces" include: "prayer and march"<sup>29</sup> - both appearing in an increased number in this work.)

Giselda's prayer is placed at the beginning of the opera, when the heroine is still a young woman under the protection and influence of her family – since she uttered her prayer at her mother's prompting. During the story Giselda's character will evolve and she will become a mature woman, in love, having her own beliefs. Quoting again musicologist Várnai Péter: "... two distinct portraits of the character are depicted: that of a timid young lady (...) and that of a woman in love, who is showing similar features; the second: a strong, striking, almost manly featured Giselda, traits that come forth within the aria that concludes the second act."<sup>30</sup>

If Giselda's character is the reason why there is a *Salve Maria* in *I Lombardi*, then Erminia Frezzolini, Giselda's role creator is the reason why this *preghiera* was conceived in its present form: an aria of a lyrical cantilena nature. Erminia Frezzolini was one of the most famous prima donnas of the time: "A young singer gifted with a pure fresh voice and perfect legato, she belonged to the generation of sopranos which in time was to lead Verdi and his contemporaries away from the more florid style of vocal writing."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Várnai Péter, *Verdi operakalauz*, ed. cit., p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

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

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed.cit., p. 121.

**Image 1**



**Erminia Frezzolini<sup>32</sup> (1818-1884)**

We can only imagine the beautiful voice of this soprano singing *Salve Maria*, for the premiere preceded the first recordings of the human voice<sup>33</sup> carried out in the nineteenth century. There are, however, stellar interpretations recorded in the second half of the twentieth century that we highly recommend to our readers, namely two recordings of heightened sensitivity. The first is a recording of a rehearsal with Maria Callas's voice, the second being a version interpreted by Sylvia Sass. For those who prefer a fuller and darker voice than that of the *spinto*, corresponding to Verdi's concept for this role, we recommend Ghenă Dimitrova's interpretation; while the most lyrical approach of the role will be that of soprano Cristina Deutekom.

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Several years later, Verdi will rewrite *I Lombardi* (as in many other cases). The French version of the opera – *Jérusalem* – represented by the

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<sup>32</sup> Source of photograph:

[www.flickr.com/photos/80564586@N07/7917483830/sizes/o/in/photostream/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/80564586@N07/7917483830/sizes/o/in/photostream/) © All rights reserved by Bialystok-Stavenuiter, accessed on June 3, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> "Attempts to record and reproduce sound waves originated with the invention in 1857 of a mechanical sound-recording device called the phonograph by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville. The first device that could actually record and play back sounds was developed by the American inventor Thomas Alva Edison in 1877." Source:

<http://www.britannica.com/technology/phonograph>, accessed on September 15, 2015.

Paris Opera at La Salle Peletier on November 26, 1847, has changed in many respects. The heroine's prayer is placed at the beginning of the work (act I, scene 2), the first aria of the heroine. Her music has remained the same, only certain 'superficial' aspects being changed: Verdi cuts the short invocation present before the aria, the text is a new French paraphrase of *Ave Maria*, and the character is called Hélène instead of Giselda. And last, but not least, the aria regained its original name of *Ave Maria*.

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In concluding our analysis, we can say that this prayer, though written in his first creative phase, is in our opinion, the pinnacle of Verdi's *preghiere*, while being one of the best pages of *the I Lombardi (Jérusalem)* opera. While being merely the second prayer intended for his heroine, it is nonetheless much more complex than that of *Nabucco*, having more in common with the last prayer of a Verdi heroine, Desdemona. There are old patterns that represent a starting point – the recitativo and aria pair, the arpeggio discourse in the accompaniment, the text of the Catholic prayer –, however, what Verdi accomplishes here is adapted to fit his own views, and is placed in a modern harmonic and formal context, in which the creative freedom of the romantic genius is manifested.

A rare beauty, it is both curious and regrettable that the aria has not been included (at least) within the concert repertoire for soprano voice – however, its value has been recognized, among others, by the great genius of romanticism, Franz Liszt, since it can be indeed found among his piano paraphrases...

*Translated from Romanian by Juliánna Köpeczi*

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