

III. PRAYERS OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN GIUSEPPE VERDI'S OPERAS. LUCREZIA'S CAVATINA – *TU AL CUI SGUARDO ONNIPOSSENTE* (ACT I, SCENE 2) FROM VERDI'S *I DUE FOSCARI*

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SUMMARY. With this analysis the author continues with the presentation of the prayers of female protagonists² from Giuseppe Verdi's operas, a lesser-known topic within the vast bibliography dedicated to the *oeuvre* of the great Italian Maestro. After presenting prayers from *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, the author now addresses a less conspicuous prayer "hidden" in the pages of *I due Foscari*: Lucrezia Contarini's Cavatina (with its *bel canto* traits and featuring a female choir). Further analyses published in this series will shed light upon well-known examples of *preghiere* – such as famous prayers of Leonora from *La Forza del Destino* –, as well as other arias which bear further *bel canto* influences (*preghiere* from *Giovanna d'Arco* and *Stiffelio*), but also illustrating how the musical language of female prayers has transformed in Verdi's more mature operatic works, such as *Aida* and *Otello*.

Keywords: *preghiera*, prayer, opera, Verdi, *I due Foscari*, Lucrezia, aria, analysis

1. Verdi's *I due Foscari*. General Aspects

We continue our analytical venture with the opera *I due Foscari*. Chronologically speaking, this work follows *Ernani*, but the latter does not contain prayers for the female voice, nor other *preghiere* (although it contains a well-known aria for prima donna *Ernani*, *Ernani involami*).

I due Foscari, however, contains two arias that are in fact prayers. These are rendered by the husband and wife – Lucrezia Contarini and Jacopo Foscari –, as if the librettist Francesco Maria Piave and Verdi, the composer, wanted to unite them even more, by way of this symbolic gesture. Jacopo's Prayer, *Non maledirmi, o prode*, from Act II, is one of the most

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² 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*).

popular pages of the opera *I due Foscari*,³ this being a restless cry of a man awaiting exile, his death sentence, in the pit of a deep, dark dungeon. However, Lucrezia's prayer – *Tu al cui sguardo onnipossente (Act I, Scene 2)* – is not usually known, as if it would be intentionally "hidden" also by Verdi himself, who had decided to name the scene *cavatina* and not *preghiera*, thus emphasizing its role as the first aria of a soloist.

The opera *I due Foscari*, based on Byron's play by the same name,⁴ had its premiere at the Teatro Argentina in Rome, in 1844. With this new work, Verdi hoped to repeat the success of *Ernani*, following the same pattern, the oeuvre being "relatively short, focusing on conflict rather than on grand stage effects."⁵

Nevertheless, the opera's success was late to arrive. Verdi himself was aware of the fact that "... Byron's play does not encompass the theatrical grandeur necessary for an opera",⁶ thus urging his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, in his letter to "... try to find something that would insert a bit of verve in the work, especially in Act I."⁷ Piave, who at the time had already collaborated with Verdi's on *Ernani*, used the composer's recommendations as his guide. He minimized the action of the play to three acts, from the initial five, and added, for example, the two prayers that do not appear in Byron's drama.⁸ However, the changes have proven insufficient to win the public's sympathy and to ensure maintaining the work in the universal opera repertoire. The staging of this work has been sporadic until this day, as compared to *Nabucco*, *Rigoletto* or *La traviata* ...

They say that the positive reception that Verdi was hoping for regarding this work and its delayed occurrence would have also had something to do with the less than optimal vocal skills of the singers performing the premiere.⁹ While this might be true or false, it is not our

³ See Iván Kertész, *Fiesta-Saxum* © 1997, p. 396.

⁴ In turn, Byron wrote his drama in 1821, based on a true story, namely the tragic fate of the Doge Francesco Foscari (1373-1457). However, Byron and Verdi were not the only ones who were inspired by the topic. We can also recall two representatives of the French and Italian Romantic painting who have shown interest in this topic: Eugène Delacroix - *Les deux Foscari* (1845) and Francesco Hayez - *L'ultimo abboccamento di Jacopo Foscari (con suo padre, il doge Francesco Foscari)*, 1852.

⁵ *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O004054?q=i+due+foscari&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit, accessed on June 26, 2013.

⁶ F. Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi*, vol. I, Ricordi, Milano, 1959, p. 523, in: Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 177.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ See Lord Byron: *The Two Foscari* in: *The Dramatic Works of Lord Byron*, Published by A. V. Blake, New York, 1840, pp. 475-539.

⁹ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed.cit., p. 179.

place to argue in favor of neither stance, nevertheless, these singers have created history, and their names deserve to be mentioned alongside the characters they portrayed and the type of their voice:

Francesco Foscari, Doge of Venice (baritone) – Achille De Bassini
Jacopo Foscari, his son (tenor) – Giacomo Roppa
Lucrezia Contarini, Jacopo Foscari's son (soprano) – Marianna Barbieri-Nini
Jacopo Loredano, Member of the Council of Ten (bass) – Baldassare Miri
Barbarigo, a Senator (tenor) – Atanasio Pozzolini
Pisana, Friend and confidant of Lucrezia (mezzo-soprano) – Giulia Ricci¹⁰

2. *Tu al cui sguardo onnipossente* – Cavatina (Act I, Scene 2)

2.1. Soprano Role Creators



Marianna Barbieri-Nini (1818-1887)¹¹

We stop for a moment to mention the role creator of Lucrezia Contarini, namely soprano Marianna Barbieri-Nini (1818-1887), whose vocal qualities – a strong, dramatic voice, possessing also the agility of a coloratura¹² – have left their mark on the voice our heroine and her prayer. The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians offers other noteworthy

¹⁰ The cast of characters and performers was quoted from: Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed.cit., p. 174.

¹¹ <https://amfortas.wordpress.com/2013/01/09/il-corsaro-di-giuseppe-verdi-al-teatro-verdi-di-trieste-notizie-curiose-e-semiserie-in-attesa-della-prima-di-venerdi-11-gennaio/> accessed on March 15, 2016.

¹² *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/02008?q=marianna+barbieri+&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit, accessed on July 1, 2013.

information on Marianna Barbieri-Nini: she was the student of famous soprano Giuditta Pasta, and that of the renowned singing teacher Nikolai Vaccai; she made her debut at La Scala, later singing on the great European operatic stages, such as Paris, London, Barcelona and Madrid.¹³ She was the first Lucrezia Borgia, Anna Bolena (Donizetti) and the first Semiramide (Rossini) in the history of opera, being also the role creator for the absolute world premieres of three verdian heroines: Lucrezia Contarini, Lady Macbeth and Gulnara from *Il Corsaro*.¹⁴

Nowadays, searching through the recordings of the *I due Foscari* opera, we find few internationally renowned sopranos who approached the role: Maria Vitale, Katia Ricciarelli, Leyla Gencer, Montserrat Caballé or June Anderson, for example, all delivering different and outstanding interpretations of the role, performances that we highly recommend to our readers.

2.2. The “Leitmotifs” of the Opera and Lucrezia’s Prayer

Let us return now to the narrative of the opera *I due Foscari*. The work presents a Venetian family drama, the center of which is Jacopo Foscari, the Doge Francesco Foscari’s son. The young Foscari is found guilty and sentenced to be exiled by the Venetian state’s Council of Ten. The Doge, who loves his son and believes in his innocence, cannot save him; he listens helplessly to the pleas of his daughter in law, who tries desperately to save her husband. Lucrezia is forbidden to follow her husband in exile, and sees him for the last time in prison, where he bids farewell to his wife and his father. Jacopo is then led to hear the Council’s sentence, and is sent to the island of Crete. He dies before light is shed on his innocence; nevertheless, Loredano, the enemy of the Foscari, has not yet gotten even with the family, he obliges the old Doge to give up his position as the ruler of Venice, which will eventually kill the latter.¹⁵

We could say that the story of *The Two Foscari* starts work with the Prelude of the opera, which already introduces its characters. We refer here to several “musical elements” used as quasi-leitmotifs,¹⁶ through which each of the protagonists is assigned a musical motif that characterizes them, and which will reappear during the following acts. The heroine of the opera, Lucrezia Contarini, receives the following agitated,¹⁷ strong and determined “leitmotiv”, throughout the work:

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ The presentation of the opera’s synopsis is based on Iván Kertész, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

¹⁶ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed.cit., p. 180.

¹⁷ *Opera. Composers, Works, Performers*, Ed. András Batta, Könemann, 2005, p. 677.

E.g. 1



Lucrezia's agitated "leitmotif" from *I due Foscari*

However, the Prelude of the opera – which introduces an entire musical fragment in order to invoke Lucrezia – does not feature this "leitmotif", but a quote from her Cavatina (her prayer), coupled with Jacopo's "leitmotif":

E.g. 2

Prelude to the opera *I due Foscari* (excerpt)

2.3. Analysis

Subsequent to the instrumental prelude, the first scene of the opera shows us Venice in 1457, with its political intrigue, lust for power and vengeance, all characteristic of this rich maritime state, fascinating, but also startling and decayed at the same time. The plot begins *in medias res*, while the first scene depicts the assembly of the Council of Ten Inquisitors, which is preparing to deliberate in the case of Jacopo Foscari (however, we will find out only later in the opera the reason for his conviction):

Act I, Scene 1. *Outside the Council Chamber of the Doge's Palace of Venice.* The curtain rises and we are witnessing the gathering of the Council of Ten Inquisitors. The initial choir fragment (*Silenzio ... Mistero*) immediately shrouds the opera in a threatening atmosphere, musically suggested by the bleak vocal and instrumental sounds and meandering chromatic passages. The melody of the clarinet introduced firstly in the Prelude is echoed again, when Jacopo appears on stage, coming out from prison to be questioned by the Council. He greets his beloved Venice with an arioso orchestrated ever so delicately, and sings the first section of his *Cavatina*. The first movement, "*Dal più remoto esilio*", evokes the local color of the piece by the 6/8 rhythm, its protruding sounds from the woodwind section and unusual chromatic passages. The "Odio solo, ed odio atroce" cabaletta is energetic as usual, although breaking with conventions with the high pitch A held by the tenor while the orchestra plays the reprise of the main theme.¹⁸

The second scene of the work (*Scena, coro e Cavatina*)¹⁹ takes place at the Foscari Palace. The ascending theme that is present in the string section – Lucrezia's "leitmotif" – announces the arrival of Jacopo's faithful wife, who comes to confront her father-in-law, the Doge of Venice. Together with him, she wants to find a way to save her husband, the Doge's son. Lucrezia is, retained, however, by her ladies-in-waiting. Lucrezia reposts to this gesture (*No... mi lasciate... andar io voglio lui... – recitative*), but stops when hearing their words (*Resta, quel pianto accrescere può ...*), which talk about hope and urges her to say a prayer to the Almighty. Lucrezia listens to their advice, and responds affirmatively with a short cadence (*Ah si, ah si, conforto*), after which she addresses the Heavens.

The entrance, *Lucrezia's Cavatina* (a three-strophic form of the following type A A1 A1v) is a luminous sounding prayer (D major), with a strong *bel canto* quality, characterized by an unusual style of ornamentation even for Verdi's first creative period.²⁰ In contrast with the actual entrance

¹⁸ Based on: *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O004054?q=i+due+foscari&search=quick&pos=&_start=1#firsthit, accessed on June 26, 2013.

¹⁹ The delimitation may vary from one edition to another. This particular one is based on the piano reduction G. Verdi - *I due Foscari*, ed. Ricordi, Milano, f.a., <http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/a/a6/IMSLP30543-PMLP68963-foscari.pdf>, accessed on July 2, 2013), however, in the orchestral score used by us it appears as: *Scena ed aria* (G. Verdi - *I due Foscari*, act I, Ricordi, Milano, f.a. reprinted by Edwin F. Kalmus, Miami, f.a. in http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/5/5d/IMSLP52674-PMLP68963-Verdi_-_I_due_foscari_-_Act_I_orch_score.pdf, accessed on July 2, 2013).

²⁰ *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O004054?q=i+due+foscari&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit, accessed on July 2, 2013.

of Lucrezia (marked by *Allegro agitato*), the cavatina's tempo is adjusted to the text and purpose of the aria, the heroine singing her prayer in an *Andante maestoso* tempo, in piano (which is highly appropriate for a mannered aristocrat belonging to the *Quattrocento* era, who has most probably received the most rigorous catholic upbringing).

Even if the listener is not aware that the heroine is about to sing a prayer, this can be inferred from the introductory bars of the *Cavatina* (bars 1-5)²¹: the orchestration of the fragment reintroduces here two instruments associated with religious sentiment, the harp and the flute (the latter being doubled at the beginning by the clarinet at a lower octave). Moreover, the chamber music-type introduction highlights again the "arpeggios that are characteristic to prayers", while the ternary rhythm of the triplets bring forth a counterpoint to the binary dotted rhythm of the vocal score. Lucrezia utters the opening lines of his prayer while kneeling,²² by way of a "free", non-liturgical supplication text:

*Tu al cui sguardo onnipossente
Tutto esulta, o tutto geme;
Tu che solo sei mia speme,
Tu conforti il mio dolor.*

*You under whose omnipotent gaze
All exalt, or all groan;
You who alone are my hope,
Comfort my pain.*²³

The four verses quoted above create the image of an omnipotent God who has the power to create and destroy life with a glance; the One who sustains life and is worthy of the praise of all creatures (*tutto esulta*), but Who also has the power to crush in an instant (*tutto geme*). Such an Almighty God is the One to Whom Lucrezia addresses her plea of hope (*solo sei mia speme*), and Whom she trustingly invokes, not unlike she would her own father (we should note that she addresses Him by using the second person singular form of the pronoun, *you*), while expecting His compassion and understanding (*conforti il mio dolor*).

These verses, which depict the father-like image Lucrezia has of God, are coupled with a simple musical score, which is at the same time a sublime one: her voice renders her monologue over the arpeggios accompaniment of the harp, thus evoking the technique of the accompanied monody, which was characteristic to the early stages of the opera as a genre. The first musical period (A, bars 6-13) consists of a single musical section, a musical phrase with an arc form, which is initially introduced in a simple form, and then repeated in a varied form and ornamented. The diatonic harmonies are assigned the

²¹ The numbers refer only to the bars of the *Cavatina*!

²² *S'inginocchia* is indicated in the score.

²³ The lyrics in English come from the following source: <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/levwool/page4.html>, accessed on March 11, 2016.

basic key of D major – which could illustrate here Lucrezia’s hope – changed to a minor key for a just a moment, in order to highlight the meaning of the word “*gemo*”.

E.g. 3

6
LUC. (s'inginocchia)
Tu al cui sguardo onni - pos - sen - - te tut - to esulta, o tut - to

9
L ge - - - me; tu che so - lo sei mia spe - - me, tu con -

12
L - for - ta il mi - o, il mi - o do - lor

The first musical period (A) of Lucrezia’s Prayer

After gaining some courage, Lucrezia then rises (which is expressly marked in the score by giving a specific indication of a nonverbal gesture: *s'alza*), not unlike someone who is standing in front of a judge and asks for justice to be made and they be protected, since they know they are innocent. Her gesture is accompanied by words that express precisely these things:

*Per difesa all'innocente
Presta tu del tuon la voce, ah!
Ogni cor il più feroce
Farà mite al suo rigor.*

*Prepare your voice of thunder
In the defense of the innocent,
And the fiercest heart
Will make its severity mild.²⁴*

²⁴ The lyrics in English come from the following source:

<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/evwool/page4.html>, accessed on March 11, 2016.

Not only the heroine's attitude, but also this new period of musical material (A1, from bar 14, with anacrusis) is anew at first. The key signature switches to A major, while the orchestration becomes denser – the densest of the prayers analyzed so far, for the strings also make their appearance, together with the woodwind section, two horns in D, a cimbasso,²⁵ a harp and timpani – Verdi, thus, is making sure that the writing stays light, airy.²⁶ The vocal range shifts to a medium-high pitch register, while the melody is increasingly ornate in the spirit of a *bel canto* aria, allowing the soprano to show off her technical skills henceforth: instrumental-type virtuosity (a process rooted in the Baroque era and further developed in the *bel canto* era) and a cantabile melodic line, with jumps and high notes often sung in a lowered volume. These features are further perpetuated in the vocal writing of this musical period, which recalls the first sentence of the aria, but transfigures it highly with profuse ornamentation (bars 18 to 21, first beat). The virtuosity and technical difficulty of the section reach their peak, the manuscript of the fragment showing that Verdi composed the opera with great care, rewriting the fioritura²⁷ of Lucrezia's melodic line several times:

E.g. 4

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a vocal piece. The first system, starting at bar 12, shows a vocal line with a melodic line that is increasingly ornate. The lyrics are: "for - ta il mi - o, il mi - o do - lor. Per di - fe - sa al! in - no -". The second system, starting at bar 15, continues the vocal line with a highly ornate melodic line. The lyrics are: "- cen - te presta tu del tuon la vo - ce, ah!.....". The piano accompaniment consists of a dense texture of strings, woodwinds, and harp, with a cimbasso (bass trombone) and timpani also present.

²⁵ "Cimbasso" (It.) - Bass trombone with a ventilation system, used in the 19th century in Italian opera orchestras. *Dicționar de termeni muzicali*, ed. cit., p. 115.

²⁶ The orchestration elements of the aria can be observed in the general score of the Cavatina, which is attached to the thesis.

²⁷ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. I, ed. cit., p. 185.

ADÉL FEKETE

18
 1. o - gnior il più fe - ro - - ce fa - rà mi - te il su - o ri - gor.

The second musical period of Lucrezia's Prayer
 (A1, from bar 14 with anacrusis)

The last section of the aria (A1v) is the most interesting, for it introduces also the women's choir in a most unusual way. Verdi reveals here a quasi-responsorial dialogue created by the encouragement sung in thirds by the women's choir (*Sperar puoi dal ciel clemente un conforto al tuo dolor*, uttered twice) and Lucrezia's highly ornate musical discourse with a cadence-like character (which, from a musical standpoint brings forth a newly ornamented variation of the consequent musical phrase in A1). Thus, the Cavatina receives its ensemble feel:

E.g. 5

21
 1. - gor. *ppp*
 CORDO
 Spe - - - rar puoi dal ciel cle -
 22
 - men - - te un con - for - - to al tuo do -

III. PRAYERS OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN GIUSEPPE VERDI'S OPERAS. LUCREZIA'S CAVATINA ...

23
- lor, spe - - rar puoi dal ciel cie -

24
LUC.
Ah!.....
men - te un con - for - to al tuo do - lor,

26
L
O - gni cor il piú fe - ro - - ce fa - rà mi - te il su - o ri - go.
rall.
col canto

The third musical period of Lucrezia's Prayer, with the choir (A1v)

The dialogue becomes even more intense in the last bars of the aria's inner expansion, featuring only cut-outs of musical cells and motifs from the two different "thematic" musical discourses (voice, choir), the aria ending with Lucrezia's cadence (that had a large vocal range, spanning on almost two octaves), her final trill being accompanied by the entire vocal-symphonic ensemble.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece. It consists of three staves. The top staff is for the solo voice (L), the middle staff is for the chorus (CORO), and the bottom staff is for the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: - gor, il suo ri-gor, ah!..... il suo ri-gor. al tuo do-lor, al tuo do-lor, do-lor. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The vocal cadence and final cadence of the *preghiera*

There are a few observations that we would like to add at the end of the above-seen musical analysis concerning the *Cavatina*, with regards to the broader context of the whole opera.

First, it is quite curious how Verdi conceived the entrance of Lucrezia (the *Cavatina*) in the form of a prayer. Lucrezia is a strong female character, the only one of the Foscari family who dares to acknowledge the truly evil side of Loredano and dares to oppose this dangerous enemy of both her husband and her father in law. Hence, the last thing we would expect from this proud and courageous aristocrat is for her to pray. (Her bravery is unheard of in that age: she enters, for example, the chamber of the Council of Ten.) Nevertheless, her condition as a woman who lives in the 15th century limits her influence, and robs her of the real chance to actually change anything concerning the fate of her husband. Perhaps this is the reason why she invokes her heavenly Father and appears before her earthly father prior to doing anything on her own.

However, her prayer will not get a favorable answer: the Doge does not have the power or the will to put his paternal feelings first as opposed to his sense of duty, even though he loves his son. He, not unlike his son Jacopo, are blinded by the lure of their beloved city, Venice. Nevertheless, their loyalty is “rewarded” by treachery, death and mockery: Jacopo is exiled and dies, while in the end the old Doge is forced to abdicate.

Although she loses everything, Lucrezia remains a model of human dignity: she had the courage to speak the truth and to confront power; she was ready to love and sacrifice her life; she was the support of those in need and came to their aid; and whatever the future would have brought her, she raised her sons with dignity, proudly bearing the name Foscari.

Lucrezia is the prototype of the tragic heroine, who is thrown in the most difficult circumstances by destiny, while refusing to be defeated, fighting with all her might to change the given situation. She first tries to create change by praying, then by attempting to change the fatidical destiny of her husband through her own actions.

Byron's merit in creating Lucrezia Contarini is to have envisaged this strong character out of a woman and wife doomed to a life of obedience and silence by the social conventions of her time; while Verdi's merit is to have created yet another side of Lucrezia Contarini who – even though is strong – still takes refuge, if need be, under the protective wing of the one true Judge.

Translated from Romanian by Juliánna Köpeczi

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