

## Scene VIII: Further Advancements (1867-1890)

We now back up a few years to the point where Wagner was wrapping up *Die Walküre* in order to pick up the thread of what was happening in the rest of Europe. Of course, the most famous opera to have premiered during this period of time was Bizet's *Carmen*, yet although *Carmen* is indeed a very fine opera, skillfully written and well-knit as a musical whole, it only partially fulfills our criterion of a dramatic work, the same as Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* and Gounod's *Faust*, thus it will not be discussed in this volume.

Rather, we start with a work by Verdi which showed not only his growing powers of musical characterization and sophistication of technique, but also, for him, a surprisingly firm grasp on projecting subtle nuances in an opera plot. That opera is *Don Carlos*.

### **Verdi: *Don Carlos* (1867)**

The genesis of this undoubted masterpiece, possibly Verdi's most complex and sophisticated work, was Friedrich von Schiller's play *Don Carlos, Infant von Spanien* with certain elements taken from Eugène Cormon's play *Philippe II, Roi d'Espagne*. The composer was fortunate to also have the help of two experienced librettists, Joseph Méry and Camille de Locle, who did an excellent job of combining these two works to produce a coherent and excellent libretto to meet Verdi's requirements.

That Verdi should reach a point in his development at age 54 that Wagner had reached by the time he wrote *Lohengrin* at age 35 is not so much a condemnation of Verdi as it is a tribute to Wagner's transcendent genius. From the standpoint of harmonic complexity, Verdi never was able to write a work as sophisticated as *Tristan und Isolde*, but then again, neither was anyone else. We must resist the temptation to use Wagner's startling advancements as a cudgel to beat other composers with, simply because it is not fair. Wagner upset the entire course of music history as it had been rolling along for two centuries. Verdi was simply a part of the mainstream.

Sixty years ago, a detailed plot of *Don Carlos* would have been necessary for readers, since it was still a relatively rare opera in live performance, but its reputation and popularity have grown so much since then that this is unnecessary. Most people are also now aware of the differences between the various versions, so here, too, we shall only make occasional references rather than picking the plot apart in little pieces. But we will comment, and rightly so, on the extraordinary quality of this music. In the original score, after the orchestral prelude, we hear a chorus of foresters; this is set to a peppy tune similar to the old Verdi. It was later cut, and I think rightly so, because it sounds foreign in the context of his new style. I believe that most of it is, aside from the *Messa da Requiem* and *Falstaff*, Verdi's best-orchestrated score. No longer do we feel, as some have described his early and middle-period operas, of the voices being accompanied by a "big guitar." The orchestra in *Don Carlos* has a deeper, darker feel while still sounding like Verdi. One is much more aware of the trombones, French horns, celli and basses here than in any of his other operas. This gives the music greater *gravitas*, yet there are still moments, such as the chorus near the beginning of the Fontainebleau scene, that hark back to his earlier style—but they are not many, and the few there are, like the Carlos-Posa friendship duet, make sense and fit into the opera dramatically without holding up the progress of the plot.

One of the great satisfactions of *Don Carlos* is that the characters are introduced and the plot unfolds in a way that seems natural and organic. Nothing really seems rushed to fit operatic convention; there are no odd or uncomfortable gaps in the plot to confuse a first-time audience member (unless, of course, they're watching one of the more idiotic modern stage productions that rewrite and skew the story line). Elisabeth and Carlos meet; they fall in love; they learn who each other is, and then the hammer falls. Spain and France have settled their differences and de-

clared peace, but Elisabeth de Valois, the French princess, is to become the wife of Carlos' father, King Philip II, a self-righteous hard-nose who rules with an iron fist. Carlos' only solace is his friendship with Rodrigo (or Rodrigue in the French version), Marquis of Posa, who is leading the fight for freedom in Flanders. Aside from the sexual tension of Carlos holding his feelings in even when in the presence of the woman he loves, now his stepmother, there is the added dimension of the fact that Philip is *also* Rodrigo's friend and supports his efforts in Flanders, much to the chagrin and hatred of the Roman Catholic Church and, worse yet, of its all-powerful militant wing, the Office of the Holy Inquisition. In one fell swoop, Verdi and his librettists managed to create an utterly brilliant theatrical work that also shed light—and a very unwelcome light—on the darker side of the Catholic Church in that period of time. This was so offensive to American Catholics that, when Rudolf Bing revived *Don Carlo* in its Italian version at the Metropolitan Opera in 1950, dozens of people picketed the opera, denouncing it as anti-Catholic. Well, hooray for them.

Even in the opening Elisabeth-Carlos duet in Act I, we know we are hearing a new and different Verdi. Gone is the obsequious tunefulness of yore; though still very melodic, he did a brilliant job of matching words and music. One wonders how much this cost him, knowing full well that when the opera premiered it was bound to disappoint those who wanted more music like *Trovatore* and *Traviata*, but bless him, he stuck to his guns. Note, too, how he continues this scene, seamlessly blending this duet into an *a cappella* chorus and back again. He was becoming a truly great composer.

The opening of Act II, set in a monastery, is well familiar to all, particularly since this is where Verdi eventually began the opera in his shortened four-act Italian version, but even here, when Posa enters, he and Carlos sing a surprisingly peppy duet for a bit which is quite different in character from most of the scene. There is also an *arioso* for Rodrigue that is nearly always cut, but it's good music and it fits in. So does the "extra" music in the more famous Posa-Carlos duet; and here, in the original version, one notices high flutes in the orchestral passage between choruses that were omitted later on. The Eboli scene that opens Scene 2 of the second act is superfluous music; I'm sure it was written at the original mezzo's request to show off her voice, but it is nice music and not offensive or too simplistic. (On the contrary, those Middle Eastern-sounding melismas are very difficult to sing.) Here, as in the Italian version, Posa has several trills to sing in his music, first in the scene with Eboli and later, of course, in his first aria of the prison scene. They were just about the last trills Verdi wrote for a character, and here, as with Wagner's Brünnhilde, they were not so much a dramatic device as a way of showing each character's more vulnerable, chivalrous side, but the baritone really should at least *try* to sing them. Most don't even make a pass at them. The ensuing Elisabeth-Carlos duet is, in my opinion, one of the greatest pieces Verdi ever wrote, and in the French version we also get some extra passages that are normally cut in performance—but shouldn't be. Some of the ballet music, *de rigueur* in France, is pretty good and much of it pretty bad, as you might expect. The Carlos-Eboli-Rodrigue trio is yet another dramatic masterpiece; not a note is wasted, and all of it is dramatic. Indeed, for the most part one goes from highlight to highlight in this opera. Even in the music that is normally cut, there is little weakness.

Incidentally, we owe a debt of gratitude to musicologists David Rosen and Andrew Porter for discovering this music. Porter, visiting the Paris Opera library, asked to see the score and was astounded to learn that the music that Verdi cut, even before the premiere, and was thought lost, was all there, but it was Rosen, in 1969, who found the most important missing scene, the extended finale to Act IV, folded down in the conductor's copy of the score. Leave it to the French to not care enough to investigate a score in their own library. The total amount of "missing" music comes to roughly a half-hour. In addition to none of it being bad or routine, it gives greater

cohesion to the opera and explains the details of the drama as it unfolds. Most important of all is the original finale of Act IV. After the death of Posa, which is where most productions end this act, Philip enters, finds his friend dead, and laments along with Carlos in a fairly long duet of exquisite music which Verdi later reworked as the “Lacrimosa” of his *Requiem*. Then the people burst into the prison and confront Philip; none of his threats scare them into submission; but they are immediately subdued and frightened upon the arrival of the Grand Inquisitor. This is yet another interesting feature of *Don Carlos*, in that the people are a “character” in the drama. Although I have no proof of this, I suspect that *Don Carlos*, with its dark, somber orchestration, revelation of those in power as corrupt and egotistical, and the use of a chorus of the people as a protagonist, all had an influence on Modest Mussorgsky when he wrote *Boris Godunov*.

The last act in the French version is pretty much as we know it, and while listening to it, it suddenly dawned on me that, although this was ostensibly a five-act opera, it’s really a three-act opera with a prologue and epilogue since both are relatively short (about a half-hour each) with the main dramatic action occurring in the middle three acts. Moreover, this prologue and epilogue are almost mirror images of each other since both involve mostly Elisabeth and Carlos. but in drastically different circumstances. In the first, their love is fresh and passionate; in the last, Carlos has finally come to love her as his mother and nothing else. He is bound for Flanders to help fulfill Rodrigue’s mission, while she only longs for death. The gate at the tomb of Charles V (Charlemagne) opens and the monk appears to take Carlos inside. Philip and the Inquisitor, both arriving on the scene, recognize his voice as being that of Charles himself. Neither Verdi nor his librettists ever resolved whether the monk is the living Charlemagne or his ghost; the viewer is to decide for him or herself.

In addition to all the things I’ve already pointed out, *Don Carlos* also uses a great many snippets of music from earlier arias, duets and scenes as leitmotifs, one of the most clever being a wistful orchestral recall of the Carlos-Posa friendship duet (in Act II) in the auto-da-fe scene at the end of Act III, but there are others, and they are all effective. In only one instance was the revision better than the original, and that was in the orchestral introduction to Eboli’s famous “O don fatal!” aria, where he later added five clipped notes by the French horns. But that’s the only point in the entire score where I believe the revision was better than the original.

So why don’t we hear all this marvelous music in all performances of the opera? Three reasons. The first, and most painful for Verdi to bear, was that he was ordered to cut several passages prior to the premiere in order to “save time” so that audience members could catch the last trains back to the Paris suburbs, and although Verdi clearly had great clout by this time, he wasn’t as stubborn in his artistic resolve as Wagner was when he was told to cut passages from *Tannhäuser* but refused. Secondly, despite Italian-language performances of the opera being given not too long after the premiere in Italy and England, it wasn’t a smash hit. This “new” Verdi wasn’t as full of bop-a-long tunes and high notes as they were used to, and they didn’t care much for it. I’m sure that this, too, was exceedingly painful to a composer who undoubtedly realized that he had written a masterpiece, and I believe that it discouraged him from writing anything this complex ever again. And third, audiences even today don’t want to sit through a four-hour Verdi opera, yet they’re willing to sit through five hours of *Götterdämmerung*. Artistic subtlety doesn’t sell, even if Philip’s great fourth-act aria, “Elle ne m’aime pas,” is accepted as a masterpiece. Here, Verdi managed to combine tunefulness, albeit at a slow tempo and in a minor key, with drama. Unlike the Duke of Mantua’s “crocodile tears” aria, “Parmi veder le lagrime,” Philip’s aria brings out yet another facet of his complex character. He rules with an iron fist, but also sympathizes with Posa’s desire to save Flanders; he loves his son, but not to the point where he is willing to give up his wife, now Carlos’ stepmother, to him. All this is also brought out in his ensuing duet with the Grand Inquisitor, surely the most Russian-sounding music Verdi ever

wrote. Mussorgsky would have been proud to have created such a masterpiece as this.

In addition to being forced to cut so much music from the score just to get the premiere, Verdi continued to “adjust” *Don Carlo*, now using its Italian title, for the next 20 years, simply because he loved this opera so much and was unwilling to see it disappear from the stage due to its being unpopular. After an unsuccessful 1871 performance at Teatro San Carlo in Naples, he was persuaded to come there for further performances in November and December of 1872 *provided* that he make more changes. This is when he revised the Philip-Rodrigo duet that closed out Act II which replaced some of the previously cut material, and removed the *allegro marziale* section of the Act V Elisabeth-Carlo duet in Act V, replaced with an eight-bar fill-in. These, by the way, were the only portions of the opera that were actually written to an Italian libretto (using Antonio Ghislanzoni) and not an Italian translation of the French. Musicologist Julian Budden stated that Verdi “was to regret both modifications. Since Ricordi included these revisions into later versions of the score without changing the plate numbers, this confused some later scholars such as Francis Toye and Ernest Newman, who dated them to 1883.

And Verdi still would not give up trying to salvage this masterpiece. As early as 1875, he considered reducing the scope and scale of the opera to make it more “Verdian,” particularly after he learned from conductor Michael Costa that he had some success with it at Covent Garden after removing Act I (the Fontainebleau scene) and the ballet as well as editing other parts of the opera. In April 1882 he made the first four-act version, in French, as well as removing the ballet (which he was actually proud of), finishing this edition by March 1883. This is when he translated the libretto back into Italian once again and created the “four act Italian version” that was performed well into the 20th century. The La Scala premiere of this revised and reduced Italian version was in 1884.

There was one further revision in 1886 in which Verdi restored the Fontainebleau act but without Carlo’s aria, which was of course now in the monastery scene with Rodrigo. This was performed at Modena in December 1886 with Francesco Tamagno, who would create his *Otello* the following year, as Carlo. It’s all very sad, particularly since the complete original French version is clearly the strongest and most interesting of all.

Unfortunately, no recording of the French *Don Carlos* is both well sung and well acted. The famous video performance with Roberto Alagna, Karita Mattila, Thomas Hampson, Waltraud Meier and José van Dam features infirm singing by the soprano, hard, shrill singing by the mezzo, and beautiful singing but a boring performance by the bass and tenor. The studio recording conducted by Claudio Abbado has good but boring singing by Plácido Domingo (Carlos) and José van Dam (Philip), infirm and/or inadequate singing by the others. In the highly-touted 1972 live London performance, we hear the firm but unpleasant sound of André Turp’s tenor, an inadequate Philip, the unpleasant tone *and* horrendous wobble of baritone Robert Savoie, and boxy, dull sound as the radio broadcast tapes were processed for issue. The only saving grace of this performance is mezzo Michèle Vilma as Eboli. In the studio recording released by Orfeo, baritone Bo Skovhus has an infirm lower register but a firm top one, his tone is more attractive than Savoie’s, and he at least makes a pass at all of his trills; bass Alastair Miles’ voice is all flutter, but he is the most dramatic King Philip on records. Tenor Ramón Vargas is superb, singing with a beautiful timbre, suave style and dramatic involvement, and soprano Iano Tamar, a lighter-than-usual Elisabeth, has a gorgeous tone despite a pronounced but even flutter. The Eboli, however, is simply dreadful. I spent some considerable time replacing the mezzo on the Orfeo recording with Vilma and some of Miles’ scenes (particularly his big aria, which is abysmally sung, and the duet with the Grand Inquisitor) with excerpts from other recordings. Put together this way, you will have a flawed but acceptable recording of the full French version, including

the many passages that Mattila-Alagna-Hampson didn't bother to put back in. It is, however, worth going to this trouble for all the pleasures that hearing the original score will bring you.

Happily, there are several versions of the Italian five-act version (which is most of the French original minus all of the cut material and no ballet) to choose from. The best representation of the score, including all of Rodrigo's trills, is the 1967 recording with Renata Tebaldi (Elisabeth), Grace Bumbry (Eboli), Carlo Bergonzi (Carlo), Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (Rodrigo) and Nicolai Ghiaurov (King Philip) conducted by Georg Solti, but there's also a wonderful live performance from the 1970s with Mirella Freni (Elisabeth), José Carreras (Carlo), Piero Cappuccili (Rodrigo), Elena Obraztsova (Eboli) and Ghiaurov again as Philip, conducted by Claudio Abbado—but without any of Rodrigo's written trills.

### ***Smetana: Dalibor* (1868)**

Here again we jump from Western to Eastern Europe for a great opera, one that is known by name to many aficionados but not necessarily the music. Everyone knows Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*; it is one of the most popular comic operas of the 19th century, particularly in the Czech Republic and Germany; but although Smetana was pleased that people liked it, he was less happy that it overshadowed this work. When he was presented with a plaque commemorating the 100th performance of *Bartered Bride* in Prague, he accepted it with the words, "I wish you would perform *Dalibor* as often!" Smetana died in 1884, believing *Dalibor* to be a failure, but just a year later it was staged and suddenly became fairly popular in Czechoslovakia.

As the opera opens, the knight Dalibor is on trial before King Vladislav for having murdered the burgrave of Ploskovice to avenge the murder of his close friend, the musician Zdeněk. The king clearly wants to avenge this for political reasons, but the people support Dalibor. After giving testimony to the brutal killing of his friend, the court reduces his sentence from execution to a lifetime in prison. Interestingly, Milada, the burgrave's sister who testifies against him, realizes that she is falling in love with Dalibor. Jitka, a young village woman on Dalibor's estate, plots with her lover Vitek to free Dalibor. Borrowing a bit from *Fidelio*, Jitka disguises herself as a young man, enters the prison, and is hired by Dalibor's jailer, Beneš. She charms him into letting her into the dungeon where Dalibor is held and gives him Zdeněk's violin, singing a passionate duet. Dalibor sings a song of freedom indicating his longing to escape, but when one of the strings on Zdeněk's violin breaks, he considers it a bad omen. This turns out to be so, as the jailer tells the King of his attempted escape. The King then overrides the court's decision and condemns Dalibor to death. Milada, hearing the tolling of the bell announcing Dalibor's impending execution, summons her brother's army and storms the castle. Although she rescues Dalibor and tells him that it was her love for him that led her save him, she is mortally wounded in the battle and dies in his arms. Dalibor, emotionally distraught, stabs himself and dies with her. An alternate ending has Dalibor executed before Milada can rescue him.

Although the music of *Dalibor* is more Romantic in style and feeling, it is clearly a more dramatic score than those of *Faust* or *Carmen*. It is also, however, less tuneful in a conventional sense. Smetana used Czech rhythms and occasional snippets of Czech folk music in his score. After an orchestral-choral opening, we hear Jitka and the people—who here, as in *Don Carlos*, almost constitute a separate character—sing a strophic arioso supporting her master. This changes its character as it goes along, using dramatic string tremolos as the rhythm is suddenly suspended for a couple of bars. The music is also continuous, obviously borrowing a bit here from Wagner. Dalibor's music often contains elements of military music, which of course helps define his character.

Although *Dalibor* is not as deep an opera as *Don Carlos*, considering its time and place it is surely a fine work. Being a veteran writer of stage music, Smetana constructed his scenes with

care; there is always something “going on” onstage to engage the viewer’s attention, and the music is clearly interesting. At one point in Dalibor’s testimony, Smetana uses a chain of chromatic chords, very unusual for Czech music of that time in general or him in particular. At another point, the music continually rises in pitch via the use of transition chords, later in the same scene mirrored by falling harmonies. Romantic it may be, but predictable it is not.

In the second act, Jitka’s repeated high As in one scene reminds you strongly of Irene in Wagner’s *Rienzi*, first act, when she is being chased, except that here, Smetana uses those repeated As even in the orchestra as a sort of rhythmic and harmonic lynchpin for his development of the score. Indeed, the more you listen, the more you realize that *Dalibor*’s score is constantly in a state of harmonic flux, which is one reason why Gustav Mahler loved it so much that he “forced” it on the Viennese during his tenure as their opera director.

There’s really only one reason why *Dalibor* is not performed in most Western opera houses: the music, being continuous, does not allow audiences to whoop and holler at the ends of scenes where the soprano or tenor belts out a couple of high notes. And this is a shame, because this is one hell of an exciting ride, musically and dramatically.

After having heard several performances of the opera, both live and studio-recorded, I have to commend the one with tenor Valerij Popov in the title role, Dagmar Schellenberger as Jitka, Eva Urbanová as Milada, Jiří Kalendovský as Beneš and Valeri Alexejev as King Vladislav, conducted by Yorem David. The voices are not all beautiful, but they *are* all terribly exciting, giving a performance that crackles with drama and excitement from first to last.

### ***Mussorgsky: Boris Godunov* (1869 version 1/1873 version 2)**

Modest Mussorgsky only lived to the age of 42, due to his extreme alcoholism, and most of his creative work took place in the last 13 years of his life, yet he was clearly one of the great musical geniuses of his time. In addition to writing music that was wholly and unapologetically Russian in character, much more so than his predecessor Glnka or his successor Tchaikovsky, he nonetheless had wide musical tastes, thus I am sure that the more advanced scores of Wagner and Verdi had some impact on his aesthetic. It is to his credit, however, that he did not just lift these elements unchanged from their scores, but was able to change them through the filter of his own musical vision into something quite different and even startling.

And, of, course, *Boris Godunov* is the lynchpin, the overwhelming masterpiece that, several years before Wagner wrote *Parsifal*, completely changed the concept of opera as it was known. The problem was that the West never heard it until the early decades of the 20th century, although even then it was considered a strange and radical opera. There was a story that went around for decades, and which I heard when younger, that Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov believed that Mussorgsky’s original orchestral score for *Boris* was “incompetent,” thus he wrote an entirely new one in a more conventional Western style, but this is not entirely true. Rimsky-Korsakov was actually a good friend and a great admirer of Mussorgsky, and in fact he liked the earthy, dark colors of Mussorgsky’s score very much; but since no Western opera house was willing to stage it, he eventually came to the belief that the orchestral score was the problem. He wanted *Boris* to become known as the masterpiece it was, and possibly, down the line a few decades, Western audiences would become familiar enough with it to want to hear the original score, but Western operagoers tend, as I’ve mentioned several times, to have “lazy ears,” and what appealed to them appealed to them and was didn’t didn’t. To this day, in the 21st century, there are operagoers who prefer the Rimsky orchestration *because* it is more colorful. They don’t care what Mussorgsky was aiming at. They just don’t like his original concept.

And, as it turned out, his *original* original concept didn’t appeal to the Directors of the Imperial Theatre either. As late as 1908, Rimsky lambasted them for turning it down because the

“freshness and originality of the music nonplussed the honorable members of the committee,”<sup>1</sup> thus they used, as an excuse, the fact that there was no female leading role in the opera.

Interestingly, the source material for *Boris* was given to Mussorgsky by Lyudmila Shestakova, Mikhail Glinka’s sister, a collection of Alexander Pushkin’s dramatic works in which the story of Boris Godunov is presented in 25 scenes, written mostly in blank verse. Mussorgsky had finished the original opera by 1869 but, as already noted, he couldn’t “sell” it to the powers that be. It runs only a little over two hours and does not include many scenes we now associate with the opera, and the famous Coronation Scene is placed differently, some ways into the Prologue. Nonetheless, Mussorgsky’s genius is already in evidence; this music sounds like no one else’s, and makes absolutely no concessions to popular taste in terms of using the closed aria form at any point. Everything has an organic flow and, like Verdi’s *Forza del Destino* and *Don Carlos*, much of the action takes place in “real time” without telescoping events. Yet this early version of the opera moves from one event to the other, which are also separated in time, with a quicker pace than the revised version. One of the few weaknesses of *Boris* from a dramatic standpoint is that the character of Grigori, the false Dmitri, is rather two-dimensional. He is simply a monk who decides to pretend to be Prince Dmitri, who Boris had killed but refuses to admit, in order to gain the throne, knowing that Boris would not state publicly that Dmitri is dead. He is thus a character who desires power but isn’t as interesting as Alberich. I’ve always felt that the monastery scene with Grigori and Pimen was too long for its own good; it sets the stage for what is to come, but since it really doesn’t shed much light on the characters, much of it is superfluous. Even so, it does show that even members of the clergy could be avaricious, as did his later added scene in Poland with the Roman Catholic priest Rangoni.

The inn scene introduces two peripheral characters who are never heard from again, the wandering monks Varlaam and Missail. I’ve long felt that the former’s aria, “In the town of Kazan,” was just a bone thrown to the audience because it was bouncy and tuneful. Here, too, we see the false Dmitri in public for the first time; although Boris fears killing him, he does want him arrested because part of his ascent to power was his claim that the real Dmitri was dead. He jumps out a window and flees. In the original version of the opera, all of this takes up about half the time of the complete work.

We then get the Terem Scene, which follows Pushkin more closely than in the revised version, but even so this early version of the clock scene (“Ah! I am suffocating!”), though pretty good, is not nearly as dramatically effective as the revised version. After this, we jump to the St. Basil’s Cathedral scene, later replaced by the Kromy Forest scene which closes out the revised opera. Both contain the appearance of the Simpleton, thus when the Metropolitan Opera decided to conflate the two versions of the opera in 1976 and include *both* scenes, it came in for some heavy criticism. We then get the scene with Boris’ famous monologue, “I have attained the highest power,” followed by his prayer and death. I’ve always felt that the original ending of the death scene was more effective than the revision.

In and of itself, this earlier, more compact *Boris Godunov* is more like the Pushkin story, a succession of scenes showing bits and pieces of Godunov’s reign, but much of it is static from a theatrical perspective. All of the drama is in the words and music, and there are only a few moments where the audience can get into the work as a stage drama.

The best recording of the 1869 version of *Boris* is the one with Nikolai Putilin (Boris), Viktor Lutsuk (Grigori/Dmitri), Nikolai Ohotnikov (Pimen) and Olga Trifonova (Xenia), conducted by Valery Gergiev. This, however, comes in a deluxe package with the revised 1872 version, and that performance is not very strong. You can, however, stream the 1869 version for free

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<sup>1</sup> Rimsky-Korsakov, Nikolai, *Chronicles of My Musical Life* (Knopf, New York, 1932), pp. 109-110.

on Amazon, and there is an alternate live performance, not quite as good, available on YouTube with Yevgeny Nikitin as Boris, Sergei Semiskur as Grigori/Dmitri and Mikhail Kit as Pimen, also conducted by Gergiev, but it is only recommended for listening because the stage production is idiotic.

Mussorgsky began work on the revised *Boris* in 1871, becoming quite enthusiastic and going far beyond the initial instruction simply to add a female character and a scene for her. He completed it in 1872 and submitted it; after quite a bit of deliberation, it was finally accepted and had its premiere of three scenes in February 1873. It was enthusiastically received, much to the consternation of Mussorgsky's enemies, which led to its full premiere in January of 1874. In the premiere, the scene in Pimen's cell was cut, not due to censorship but for time considerations, and some other scenes also had cuts in them which weakened its impact. Yet despite this and the complaints of many, including most of the Russian aristocracy which detested the music, it was performed 21 times during Mussorgsky's lifetime.

Since the complete revised *Boris* is now world famous, little needs to be said of the music except that, in my view, Mussorgsky actually included a few more truly melodic passages such as the song of the police officer Nikitich and the following chorus in the opening, before the Coronation Scene proper. This also gave the music a bit more rhythmic impetus, not on the level of Verdi's Italian rhythms or Wagner's German ones, but enough to be a bit more palatable to the average listener. It was a brilliant move on his part, and it surely helped the opera even though, like poor Berlioz with *Les Troyens*, people really didn't hear the whole thing in context for decades. Also in this new version of the Prologue, as elsewhere, Mussorgsky changed the text. In the original, the people are discussing the statements of pilgrims and are baffled about this new Czar. In the revised version, they simply wonder what their purpose is and begin bickering with each other. From a musical standpoint, some of Mussorgsky's innovations were the use of the whole tone scale as well as combining two-beat and three-beat meters, similar to what Stravinsky did in 1914 with *Le Sacre du Printemps*. All of this was well ahead of its time.

More importantly, everything in the revised versions just seems to move more smoothly than in the original, and because of this the dramatic impact is all the greater. Listen carefully to the scene in Pimen's cell, for instance; in the revised version, there are "nudging" figures played by pizzicato celli and, later, high, rhythmic flute figures that are either not in the original or emphasized as strongly in terms of rhythm. It is also often overlooked that Mussorgsky used themes identified with certain characters in earlier and later scenes than when they actually appear, once again borrowing a bit of Wagner's *leitmotif* concept.

Although the scene inside Boris' chambers with his children and their nanny does not follow Pushkin as closely as the original, it is, again, more attractive music due to subtle rhythmic devices added by the flutes and pizzicato strings (in this scene, they sound more like violas or violins than like celli or basses). Introducing the game played by Xenia and Fyodor was also a bright idea, as it adds just a touch of everyday normalcy to what is, for the most part, a very dark drama. And, as noted earlier, the revised "clock scene" is superior to the old one—and Mussorgsky is not always given credit for writing, in this instance, not just atonal but microtonal music in the introduction, as the music slips and grinds its way out of tonality.

The third act sounds quite different from the rest of the opera. Since it is set in Poland, the most Western of Eastern European countries, Mussorgsky's music is quite Western in form but still in his own style, just more tonal and using richer harmonies. A chorus of women open the scene, following which the Princess Marina makes her entrance. Her music is melodic as well, but not in *da capo* aria form. After a bit, we are introduced to Father Rangoni, a Jesuit priest and the "power behind the throne." It is he who eventually encourages Marina to marry the false Dmitri in order to become Czarina of Russia so that she can convert the "heathens" to the Roman



Catholic Church. At first, Marina says she will only consider marrying him to become Czarina, which prompts him to say that if she only comes to him after he is crowned he will have everyone laugh at and mock her. Eventually she capitulates, although we never do learn whether or not they are wed before he returns to Russia to claim his throne, hence we never see or hear from her again. Throughout this entire act, the music remains more lyrical than strophic but, again, never gels into set pieces.

For the fourth and last act we are back in Moscow, first for an assembled meeting of the Duma, where it is decided that the pretender and his followers should be executed. Boris enters, disheveled, and eventually dies. We then suddenly jump to the Kromy Forest scene; the music for the entrance of the street urchins is again atonal in character. The music for the Simpleton (idiot) is a sort of wavering vocal line focused around just a few pitches, most of the time sounding like a drone encompassing no more than two notes roughly a tone apart. Here, too, Mussorgsky cleverly reintroduces Varlaam and Missail, singing in the background of Boris' crimes.

As I noted, *Boris Godunov* is still not wholly accepted by average operagoers, which is why it is still an occasional visitor to the opera house despite being part of the "standard repertoire." Although I am normally opposed to operas being sung in translation, unless the composer wrote it himself, because the translated text does not normally match the rhythm of the music, I do feel that some of these Russian operas should be heard, at least once, in the audience's vernacular so that they can follow what is going on.

The best performance of the 1872 *Borisis* the one released on video many years ago with Robert Lloyd (Boris), Alexander Morosov (Pimen), Alexei Steblianko (Grigori/Dmitri), Vladimir Ognovenko (Varlaam), Olga Borodina (Marina) and Sergei Leiferkus (Rangoni) conducted by Valery Gergiev, but be aware that, in this production, they placed the Kromy Forest scene *before* the scene with the meeting of the Duma and Boris' prayer and death for dramatic reasons. You will need to reverse them to make the performance conform with Mussorgsky's intentions.

### ***Dargomyzhsky: The Stone Guest* (1869)**

If you think that Mussorgsky had a hard time getting *Boris Godunov* performed, it was nothing compared to what Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1813-1869) went through in order to bring his most modern and radical opera to fruition. Dargomyzhsky first got the idea for this work in 1863 when reading Alexander Pushkin's fantasy play of the same name from 1830. He was so taken by Pushkin's work that he determined to set it to music almost word-for-word, the first time in operatic history such a thing was even attempted, beginning in 1866, but as the music took shape he realized that he was writing in a decidedly non-popular style. This frightened him; he knew that such an opera would probably not receive a public performance, yet he kept plugging away at it, very slowly because, much to his horror, his health was deteriorating. But he knew he was on to something original and groundbreaking, and so refused to give up. In a letter to a friend, he wrote:

*The majority of our music-lovers and newspaper hacks refuse to acknowledge that I have inspiration. Their routine outlook seeks for melodies which are pleasing to the ear and this is not my goal. Music, in my view, should not be reduced to entertainment. I want sound to act as a direct vehicle for the expression of the word. I want truth.*<sup>2</sup>

Another thing that frightened the composer was that his health began to decline; there were whole weeks when he simply could not work on the opera. Taking his friends Cesar Cui and Ni-

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted on *OperaAndBallet.com*:  
[https://operaandballet.com/opera/The\\_Stone\\_Guest/info/sid=GLE\\_1&play\\_date\\_from=15-Nov-2017&play\\_date\\_to=18-Feb-2018&playbills=39339](https://operaandballet.com/opera/The_Stone_Guest/info/sid=GLE_1&play_date_from=15-Nov-2017&play_date_to=18-Feb-2018&playbills=39339)

kolai Rimsky-Korsakov into his confidence, he explained to them how he wanted the opera finished should he not live to complete it. He died with the score on his desk in January 1869, most (but not all) of the actual music completed in piano score, but the last act not scored for orchestra. Cui and Rimsky, true to their word, finished it for him.

Despite the resistance of the musical establishment, Dargomyzhsky's opera had the backing of the more forward-looking Russian composers known as "The Five," a group which included Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin and Mussorgsky. Mussorgsky, in fact, admired Dargomyzhsky so highly that he once said in a letter that he was "the teacher of musical truth." While it is true that Mussorgsky never heard or saw the score of *The Stone Guest* until after he had written the first version of *Boris*—it wasn't staged until 1872—and in fact even that version of *Boris* went further harmonically than Dargomyzhsky, listening to *The Stone Guest* is a remarkable experience. Here, for the first time (since his work preceded Mussorgsky's), one hears an *actual* sung play—no changes to match the meter of the music, since the music followed Pushkin's text verbatim; no arias, no duets, but a stream-of-consciousness work set to tonal music that never stops developing or moving forward until the acts or scenes are finished.

Since *The Stone Guest* premiered earlier in the same year as *Boris*, one may expect me to have discussed it first, but in every way except harmonically, it is the more forward-looking opera, thus I chose to discuss it here. Pushkin's play uses the Don Juan legend as its basis but adds some new wrinkles to the story. In this version, Don Juan—whose last name, we now learn, was Tenorio—has been banished from Madrid for killing the Commodore (Commendatore in Mozart's opera). He and his servant Leporello have sneaked back into Seville, where they are hiding out in the local monastery. Juan longs to go into the city and continue his sexual adventures. The head monk tells him that Doña Anna, who in this story is the Commodore's widow and not his daughter, visits the grave and memorial statue to her husband every day.

A woman named Laura is hosting a party, where she sings a song based on a poem by Don Juan, her former lover. One of the guests, Don Carlos, is enraged by this, but after all the other guests leave she seduces him. He tells her that Don Juan has returned but that a group of his friends are conspiring to kill him. When Don Juan unexpectedly shows up, Carlos challenges him to a duel, which turns out to be a mistake, for he is killed. Laura then shows Juan a list of the conspirators, who suddenly happen to arrive on the scene, but Juan escapes.

Hiding in the monastery disguised as a hermit, Juan sees Doña Anna visit her husband's grave every day. He introduces himself as Don Diego, and she agrees to have him over her house the next day. (Apparently, in the course of the Don Juan legend, few of his former conquests recognize him.) Leporello tries to warn his master that the Commander's death was not forgiven. Juan responds by inviting the Commander to join him the next day at Doña Anna's abode.

After visiting Doña Anna and having a hot night in bed with her, Don Juan reveals who he is, admits to killing the Commander, but tells her that he has fallen in love with her. Anna cannot hate him but, rather, realizes that she has fallen in love with him as well. Don Juan schedules a new rendezvous with Anna, but before he can leave the conspirators have tracked him down, accompanied by the now moving and talking (singing) statue of the Commander. Juan offers his hand to them in friendship, but they kill him.

Considering the completely polarized reaction to *The Stone Guest* when it premiered—both lay listeners and musicians were either for it or agin it—you'd think that the music was either spikily modern, even more so than Mussorgsky, or fraught with dull *secco recitatives* in place of sung passages, but neither is true. Yes, there are some interesting harmonic touches, but the music is for the most part resolutely tonal, and although, except for Laura's aria, nothing coalesces into a set form, the music is very lyrical. But it IS a continuous musical narrative; none of it is broken up into sections, and there are no stops for applause in any of its scenes (two in the

first act, one each for Acts II and III). Compared to *Parsifal*, this is a real tune-fest, but true to his intent, Dargomyzhsky mirrors the text in terms of its words from a dramatic standpoint as well as the mood of each scene. But it's not just audiences of 1872 that hated *The Stone Guest*; if you look online, you find such comments from listeners as "not really a first-class opera" and "I'll never get this hour and a half of my life back." I find it hard to reconcile these comments with what I hear on the recording; the music is quite interesting despite the fact that Dargomyzhsky does break up the rhythm in irregular meter quite often in order to match the rhythmic accents of the words being sung. This was clearly its most controversial feature at the premiere. Tchaikovsky hated it, which to some extent tells you all you need to know.

One advantage of *The Stone Guest* over *Parsifal* and even *Boris* is that the music is more consistently rhythmic, and as we know, rhythm is the single most attractive facet of music, yet the orchestral finale to Act I is stunning, some of the most forward-looking music he ever wrote. In the second act, Don Juan's opening music is strophic (yet rhythmic); resembling some of the music Mussorgsky wrote for Grigori until the cute little dance rhythms come into play. But here the rhythm is more frequently broken up, making it harder to follow; this may have been another element that turned people off. In fact, much of this act has such irregular rhythms that even a musically sophisticated listener might have to examine the score to determine the divisions. What he did was constantly go back and forth between 4/4 and 3/4 but *also* changed the tempo, going from "Allegretto" to "Poco meno mosso," then "Allegro," four bars later "Moderato non troppo," "Meno mosso" and "Andantino." Here are some examples from the piano-reduction score of Act I to show what I mean:<sup>3</sup>

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**Allegretto.**

лестно, прелестно без - по доб - ко. Втерой гость. Как-е зву-ки! и сколько  
лестно, прелестно без - по доб - ко.

**Лаура.** Прощай тебжь госпо - да. **Гости.** Прощай Ла - у - ра прощай про - щай Ла - у - ра!  
свогъ... про щай про - щай Ла - у - ра!

<sup>3</sup> Source: [https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/7/7b/IMSLP440191-PMLP45306-Dargomyzhsky\\_A\\_The\\_Stone\\_Guest\\_FS.compressed.pdf](https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/7/7b/IMSLP440191-PMLP45306-Dargomyzhsky_A_The_Stone_Guest_FS.compressed.pdf)

**Poco meno mosso.**  
(ВЫХОДЯЩИЙ)

*ff* *pp* *ff* *pp*

**Allegro.**  
Лаура (останавливает Донъ Карлоса.)

**Moderato non troppo.**

Ты, бѣ-ше-ный, ос-танься у ме-

ня: ты мнѣ по-пра-вил-ся! ты дождь-а на на-помнишь мнѣ, какъ вы-бранилъ ме-

ня и стиснулъ зу-бы, съскрежетомъ!

Донъ Карлосъ.

Счаст-ли-вецъ! И ты е-го лю-ди.

Indeed, as this act continues, one notes the music getting quite weird indeed in places. Even the orchestration becomes darker and more complex.

By contrast, the opening of Act III returns to more regular rhythms, and there is a nice little *arioso* for Doña Anna that leads into the duet with Don Juan telling her who he really is and that he loves her. As the situation becomes tenser and more dramatic, the music again tightens up and the meter begins shifting again, continuing to do so as the tempo increases and the music becomes much more dramatic. The Don's confrontation with the Commander's statue is just as dramatic as that in *Don Giovanni*, only much more Russian-sounding, with a strong undercurrent of tympani as he dies.

I have only located two recordings of this opera, although there also appears to have been a live performance from 1979 which was briefly on DVD. Of those two—an earlier mono recording with Nikolai Vassiliev as the Don and Vyacheslav Pochapsky as Leporello and a 1977 stereo recording with Vladimir Atlantov (Don Juan), Alexander Vedernikov (Leporello), Tamara Sinyavskaya (Laura), Tamara Milashkina (Donna Anna) and Vladimir Filippov (Commander), conducted by Mark Ermler—I much prefer the latter not only for its better sound but for the far superior voices of Atlantov and Sinyavskaya and the more exciting conducting of Ermler.

### **Verdi: *Aïda* (1871)**

*Aïda* is both a very good opera and a fairly conventional one. It contains much that is good but also quite a bit that is banal, particularly the “Triumphal scene,” yet over the past 150 years it has attracted several great singing actors in the roles of Aïda, Amneris, Radames, Amonasro and even Ramfis, not to mention the fondness of many great conductors. Commissioned by Isma'il Pasha, then the Khedive of Egypt, to celebrate the opening of the Khedivial Opera House (not the anniversary of the founding of Egypt, as is sometimes erroneously claimed), Verdi knew he was being asked to write a pageant opera full of spectacle and his trademark bouncy tunes. Since he was still smarting from the lukewarm reception of *Don Carlos*, he obviously didn't want to take any chances, but at the same time he made sure that at least parts of the opera met his approval. Even to this day, two parts of the opera are rarely performed as Verdi wrote them, Radames' opening aria “Celeste Aïda” and Aïda's third-act aria, “O patria mia,” because most tenors and sopranos who sing those roles either cannot or will not sing their climactic high notes *pianissimo* as Verdi wrote them. In later years, to help those tenors who could not ascend to a *pp morendo* high B-flat in the former aria, Verdi wrote an alternate ending in which the tenor attacks the high note loudly but then descends an octave to sing the note softly over the soft string ending, but as far as I know only Richard Tucker did this, and only once, in the 1949 broadcast performance of the opera conducted by Arturo Toscanini. Why? Simply because tenors and their fans *like* the loud high B-flat at the end. Period.

Verdi originally wrote a nine-and-a-half-minute overture to the opera, which he wisely decided to reduce to its now-common form as a three-and-a-half-minute prelude. So far as I know, the only recordings of this unpublished overture is the NBC broadcast of March 1940 conducted by Arturo Toscanini and a studio recording by Claudio Abbado. Here, as in his preludes to Acts I and III of *La Traviata*, Verdi used divided strings to create an other-worldly effect.

Although much of the music of *Aïda* was written to formula, particularly Grand Opéra formula with which Verdi was by now intimately familiar, it is clearly good Grand Opéra formula. He took pains to introduce the characters singly and explain who each of them were and their relationships to each other. He also used a few leitmotifs: the soft opening music of the Prelude turns out to be a theme that repeats itself to indicate Radames' and Aïda's love for each other. The plot is essentially a love triangle with a political twist, since Radames, as an Army Captain, has led the Egyptians to a successful battle against the Ethiopians but has fallen in love with one

of their prize captives, the Ethiopian princess Aïda. Her father, Amonasro, the Ethiopian King, is in the group of captives Radames has brought back with him, pretending to be a commoner until he gets his chance to strike. The Egyptian princess Amneris is in love with Radames, who has no interest in her (of course!), thus she views Aïda as her opponent in love. One of the more interesting things about Aïda is that Verdi viewed her as a very sweet, almost naïve character who is caught between filial obedience—his favorite Aïda was the light soprano Adelina Patti—and her love for Radames. Her aria when the Egyptians send Radames back into battle, “Ritorna vincitore,” is actually a very fine one, satisfying on both dramatic and entertainment grounds. In my personal view, the third act of *Aïda* is one of Verdi’s great masterpieces, a growing dramatic entity from beginning to end, which contains a fine aria, the dramatic Aïda-Amonasro duet, the passionate “Nile scene” duet between Aïda and Radames, and then the revelation that Amonasro has been eavesdropping and has thus heard Radames tell Aïda where the Egyptian army is going to attack next. Radames is aghast; Amneris and Ramfis suddenly show up out of nowhere (the one dramatic flaw in this act... why on earth should they have been around the scene of Radames’ tryst?), and then Radames’ arrest. This entire third act has both a musical and dramatic flow that was unsurpassed until Verdi wrote *Otello* 16 years later.

The last act also begins brilliantly, with the confrontation duet between Radames and Amneris, “Già i sacerdoti annunsi.” This builds to an almost ferocious climax and, even more brilliantly, morphs into the scene where Amneris is alone while Radames is being asked to defend himself before the tribunal—which he absolutely refuses to do, thus sealing his fate. The music with which Verdi closes this scene is incredibly powerful; taking a cue from Spontini’s *La Vestale*, the low brass, swirling strings and tympani fairly resounding in a theater.

Of the concluding tomb scene, I am less enthusiastic. It’s very pretty music, but goes on far too long without saying enough to really justify its length. In short, it’s more of an audience-pleaser, although there is a fine passage in the middle where Radames bursts out in full voice, the one wholly dramatic moment in the entire scene. Of course Aïda sneaks into the tomb to be buried alive with him since, after all, she loves him and knows his fate was her fault, but having Amneris also sneak in to die with them was an interesting dramatic twist. It’s just a shame that it all had to be set to gossamer elevator music.

Not surprisingly, *Aïda* was a “hit,” and news of it traveled quickly for those days. Several decades ago, I watched an Italian made-for TV biography of Verdi. All the dialogue was in Italian and, instead of having an English translation at the bottom of the screen, there was an English-speaking narrator. When the bio came to *Aïda*, they showed a group of young Italian men sitting in a café, reading the newspaper account. “Look at this report from Egypt!” one of them supposedly says; “*Aïda* is a great success! All hail Verdi! He is the greatest opera composer of them all!” And that scenario says it all. By 1871, opera was a popular, if somewhat expensive, form of grand entertainment in those years before radio, movies, television or Broadway musicals. An opera’s worth was judged by its mass appeal, not by its intrinsic worth. Most people didn’t go to see or hear sung drama. It was Hit Tune City.

Yet if you are one of those inclined to toss out the baby with the bath water in the case of *Aïda*, please remember that conductor Hans von Bülow, a confirmed Wagnerian who was taught to look down his nose at anything written by Verdi, wrote to the composer rather late in life that, after conducting performances of *Aïda* and the *Requiem*, he realized just how good a composer he was, and begged the composer’s forgiveness for having underestimated him. Verdi reacted with his usual cynical humor, but deep down it probably meant a lot to him. Even in as “simple” a passage as when the chorus chants, in the first act, “Guerra, guerra, guerra,” there is a sudden key change at the very end, and there are little touches like this throughout the score. Even the ballet music is Verdi’s best.

The only wholly dramatic reading of the entire opera, from start to finish, is the classic 1927 recording with Dusolina Giannini (Aïda), Irene Minghini-Catteneo (Amneris), Aureliano Pertile (Radames), Giovanni Inghilleri (Amonasro) and Luigi Manfrini (Ramfis), conducted by Carlo Sabajno, although neither tenor nor soprano take their crucial high notes softly. The best stereo/digital recording is Herbert von Karajan's, due to the fact that Radames (José Carreras), Aïda (Mirella Freni) and Amneris (Agnes Baltsa) all sound *young*, and everyone acts up a storm despite the fact that Karajan occasionally takes his foot off the pedal to slow down the music and let it "float." A good compromise is the 1955 hi-fi version with Zinka Milanov, Jussi Björling, Fedora Barbieri and Leonard Warren, the scariest Amonasro on records, superbly conducted by Jonel Perlea.

### ***Saint-Saëns: Samson et Dalila* (1877)**

Camille Saint-Saëns, a musical prodigy and one of the few 19th-century composers besides Wagner who can actually be termed a genius, wrote several operas in his life, including the superb comedy *Le Timbre d'argent* (1865, premiered 1877) which he considered his favorite, but it was *Samson et Dalila* that really made his name in this genre. Ironically, Saint-Saëns did not initially conceive of *Samson* as being a stage work but, rather, a "concert opera" in the same vein as Berlioz' *La damnation de Faust*, but the music was just so incredibly good that, as it turned out, theaters were eager to put it on the stage, and so they did.

Not too surprisingly, *Samson* was inspired by the composer going to Weimar to see a performance of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* in 1872. That performance was conducted not by the composer but by Wagner's father-in-law Franz Liszt, and after it was over he and Liszt had a long conversation during which Liszt convinced Saint-Saëns to write *Samson*. This isn't to say that the musical *language* of *Samson* is Wagnerian—it clearly isn't—but certain elements of Wagner's style are present, particularly the creation of long, continuous scenes within which arias and duets came and went without final endings or a break for applause. In this opera, too, Saint-Saëns made the chorus of Hebrews an important "character," giving them far more music than was normal at the time—one reason why he wasn't sure if it should be a staged work. He felt that the sometimes long choral scenes would bog down the stage action.

By the time the opera was finished, Liszt was no longer music director at Weimar, but he still exerted a strong influence in that city, and the new opera director, Eduard Lassen, owed a great deal to Liszt's influence in getting him that position. The libretto was duly translated into German (opera in each country's vernacular, America excepted, was the norm for nearly 200 years) and the premiere given on December 2, 1877. Initially, Saint-Saëns and Lassen toyed with the idea of using the legendary mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot-Garcia as Dalila, but she was too old and her voice just a shadow of what it once was, thus Auguste von Müller took that role while a well-known Heldentenor, Franz Ferenczy, sang Samson. This was, then, the first French opera to use such a heavy voice in the tenor part. The opera was, somewhat to Saint-Saëns' surprise, a resounding success, yet it was not immediately picked up by other opera houses in Europe, possibly because of the casting difficulties. The next new production was at Hamburg in 1882; the first Paris performance did not take place until October 1890, yet slowly but surely *Samson* made its victory lap around the world and, whether audiences liked it or not, it became part of the standard repertoire.

Listening to it today can still be an exhilarating experience with a really excellent cast—but, as in the case of Wagner's music dramas, that can be a touchy situation since Samson has to not only have a powerful voice but a solid one with no wobble or strain and also be a superior stage actor while Dalila needs to have, as Saint-Saëns wanted, a "creamy" voice and also be seductive. The third important role, that of the High Priest, is often overlooked because everyone in

the theater is focusing on the two name characters, but he, too must have not only a powerful voice but also be a superior singing actor. Add to that the fact that *Samson*, like Wagner's and Verdi's best operas, also demands a top-tier conductor to make it work, and you have a work that is indeed a masterpiece but difficult to find all the right parts and put them together.

The music for the chorus tends to sound like 19th-century French sacred music, but even this is interesting in context. Moreover, Saint-Saëns managed to one-up Wagner in his ability to creatively weave the chorus *around* the principals rather than having them only as an extra element. A perfect example is Samson's first, brief aria, "Israel, burst your bonds!" ("Israel, romps du chains!"), which is fully integrated into the choral music. Later in the same act, the calm choral piece "Voici le Printemps nous portant" moves seamlessly into the famous trio, "Je viens célébrer la victoire," then out again for the one ballet piece, the "Dance of the Priestesses of Dagon." Although the music only occasionally pushes the harmonic envelope the way Wagner did, Saint-Saëns, who was a master of both harmony and orchestration, manages to hold your interest in part due to the extraordinary continuity of the score and in part because of the subtle harmonic shifts he put here and there in the score. Even Dalila's rather straightforward aria "Printemps qui commence" has shifting harmonies that are not always predictable, and in the middle of it we suddenly hear the High Priest address Dalila—again, perfectly blended together.

The ensuing and rather long Dalila-High Priest duet sounds more like a French version of Verdi from his *Don Carlos* period, yet still very good. Following this, Saint-Saëns very cleverly builds up his musical structure piece by piece from "Samson, me disais-tu" through "the following duet with Samson until we suddenly hear all the pieces put together in "Mon cœur s'ouvre à toi voix," Dalila's other famous aria—which, again, is actually a duet, this time with Samson. It should also be noted that Saint-Saëns only included two relatively brief ballet sequences, one in the first act and the Bacchanale in the third, that he also integrated these into the score, and that the music is superior to most others' ballets.

The last act is also built up, both musically and dramatically, from Samson's "Vois ma misère, hélas!" through the final scene when he pushes away the pillars that hold up the temple. There is not a wrong step taken, either musically or dramatically, in this masterpiece.

I've been round and round the mulberry bush trying to find a great performance of this opera. The 1962 EMI recording with Jon Vickers (Samson), Rita Gorr (Dalila) and Ernest Blanc (High Priest), is often considered the best, but both Vickers and Blanc were recorded at such a distance from the microphones that they sound as if they were down the street and around the block, which puts much of the music out of focus. Much better is the live performance with Vickers and Blanc complemented by Oralia Dominguez' excellent Dalila, available for streaming on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3IWdNZhkNU>. The best digital performance is the 2022 DVD with Seokjung Baek (Samson), Elīna Garanča (Dalila) and Lukasz Goliński (High Priest), conducted beautifully although somewhat too slowly in the first act by Antonio Pappano. Just don't watch it; the stage production is insulting and idiotic.

### **Verdi: *Simon Boccanegra* (1881 revision)**

Going back in time to an 1857 Verdi opera in 1881 was a bit of a culture shock; despite the interesting and somewhat extensive revisions, parts of it sound more old-fashioned than even *La forza del Destino*, let alone *Don Carlos* and *Aida*, which is probably one reason why Verdi was loath to revise it in the first place. In fact, Giulio Ricordi, his publisher, first suggested revising it in 1868, one year after *Carlos*' premiere, but the lukewarm reception given this masterpiece led Verdi to shrug it off. In 1879, Ricordi went even further, mailing the original manuscript of the opera to Verdi with a personal note begging him to revise it. Apparently, Ricordi was among the minority who recognized *Don Carlos* as a major masterpiece and somehow felt that *Boccanegra*



could be adapted to be just as great, but Verdi was cynical. He wrote to Ricordi on May 2, 1879: “If you come to St. Agata in six months, or a year, or two or three, etc., you will find it intact, just as you sent it to me...Nothing would be more useless at the theater now than an opera of mine—and then, again, it’s better to end with *Aida* and the [Requiem] Mass than with an *arrangement*.”<sup>4</sup>

But something about *Simon Boccanegra* brought him back to it, although it would be another year and a half before he bothered to look at it. By that time, Ricordi had successfully persuaded Verdi to begin working with librettist Arrigo Boito on an operatic treatment of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Verdi, like Berlioz, was an avid admirer of Shakespeare; in addition to setting his *Macbeth* to music (and revising that opera years later), he had been toying for decades with the idea of producing an operatic treatment of *King Lear*, but kept coming up short in his ability to present all the subtle nuances of that play in a sung stage work.

Wikipedia gives the best and most concise summary of what came next:<sup>5</sup>

Once Verdi began to re-look at his earlier work, objections – and new ideas – began to emerge: “the score is not possible as it stands” and “I shall have to redo all the second act [1857: act 2, which became act 1 in the 1881 revision] and give it more contrast and variety, more life,” are examples of his reasoning, which he laid out in a letter to Ricordi in November 1880. His principal concern was how to make changes to the 1857 Act 2. “I have said in general it needs something to give life and variety to the drama's excessive gloom,” he writes, and he continues by recalling:

*two magnificent letters of Petrarch’s, one addressed to [the historical] Boccanegra, the other to the [then-]Doge of Venice, warning them not to start a fratricidal war, and reminding them that both were sons of the same mother, Italy, and so on. This idea of an Italian fatherland at this time was quite sublime!*<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the complexity of many of Boito's proposed ideas, along with his alternative scenarios...the Council Chamber scene emerged as the focus of the new collaboration. Although he had confidence in the young librettist's abilities, Verdi did caution Boito that he appeared to be “aiming at a perfection impossible here. I [Verdi] aim lower and am more optimistic than you and I don't despair,”<sup>7</sup> in essence, expressing an unwillingness to re-write the opera as completely as Boito had proposed. It would have been far more work than the composer wished to be involved in at the time.

The pair spent the latter part of 1880 and into January 1881 with back-and-forth additions and revisions (the composer in Genoa, the librettist in Milan and meeting only once), all of which are heavily documented in the Verdi-Boito correspondence, the Carteggio Verdi-Boito, and significantly quoted in [Julian] Budden. All this was the build-up to performances in Milan the following March, although the composer was constantly concerned about the suitability of the singers engaged there for that season, and he threatened to withdraw the opera on more than one occasion.

The result was the contrast, which Parker describes, between the original 1857 act 2 finale, “set in a large square in Genoa, [as] a conventional four-movement concertante finale, a grand ceremonial scene” whereas, in the 1881 revision, “[Verdi] injected into the heart of

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<sup>4</sup> Campo, Cristina [Vittoria Maria Cristina Guerrini], Spina, Alessandro: *Carteggio*, p. 92 (Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon\\_Boccanegra#Composition\\_history:\\_the\\_1881\\_revision](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Boccanegra#Composition_history:_the_1881_revision)

<sup>6</sup> Verdi to Ricordi, 20 November 1880, in Werfel and Stefan, pp. 360–361

<sup>7</sup> Verdi to Boito, 11 December 1880, in Julius Budden, p. 258

the work an episode of enormous vividness and power, enriching the character of *Boccanegra* in such a way that his subsequent death scene gains considerably in impressiveness.” And, as Budden puts it, “Simone (sic) rises to spiritual greatness. For the first time, his moral authority puts forth all its strength, ... positively as in the appeal for peace ...”

Yet as good as the revised *Simon Boccanegra* was compared to the original, Boito was right: Verdi should have gone further. As Claire Janice Detels pointed out in her doctoral dissertation on the *Boccanegra* revision,

In accordance with the Italian operatic tradition of *brevità* (brevity), which limited explanations of the plot in recitative sections to the barest minimum, Verdi and his original librettist Francesco Maria Piave cut out much of the political scheming and concentrated instead on the personal conflicts between the main characters, particularly the two young lovers Gabriele Adorno and Amelia Grimaldi, whose romance had been no more than peripheral in the Garcia Gutierrez play. Unfortunately, this shift in emphasis created serious confusion in the plot of the 1857 *Boccanegra*, which was only partially alleviated in the 1881 revision... Thus even the 1881 revision, although it remains in the standard operatic repertory, cannot be said to represent Verdi at his best.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps not, but it is clearly Verdi at his “pretty good” level, and the dark and very sophisticated plot line, along with the very interesting title character, puts it, in my personal opinion, just a step down overall from *Aida*. More to the point, Italian audiences in particular weren’t interested in subtle political nuance. They were interested in who loves who, whether or not there’s a conflict (preferably a love triangle), and how that is resolved or not. This was yet another reason why Italian audiences did not respond to *Don Carlo*. The conflict in Carlo’s love for Elisabeth was with his father, and that was never going to be resolved. Elisabeth accepted her fate, thus no real battle took place. Verdi had no real confidence in even an improved *Boccanegra* becoming a hit any more than he felt, at that stage, that the full five-act *Don Carlos* could be a hit, and unfortunately, he was right. The opera only had sporadic performances in Italy; it was not presented at the Metropolitan in New York until 1932, and not performed in England until 1948. After the Met premiere, the esteemed critic W.J. Henderson complained that it lacked the “opulences of harmony and instrumentation which amazed the world when the composer of ‘Traviata’ gave the world ‘Aida’ in 1871,” but rather was “Verdi in his era of enormous political plots, conspiracies, and crimes,” including “a succession of effective scenes which unfortunately become heavier and more depressing as the work moves toward its conclusion.” This is what all of Verdi’s and Boito’s hard work got them from not 19th, but 20th-century critics. More tunes, please, and less drama.

And there is something else. Because the title role requires much more nuance than even Rigoletto or Don Carlo in *Forza*, it is not a part that is often well served by the average Italian baritone. It’s a part that requires the kind of power most Italians give out only on occasion; more often, particularly in the later scenes of the opera, it requires vocal acting on a very high level. Of the two American baritones who performed it at the Metropolitan Opera, Lawrence Tibbett in the 1930s and Leonard Warren in the 1950s, Tibbett was far more responsive to the subtle demands of the role, and although Piero Cappuccilli was famous for his *Boccanegra*, he was not as subtle as Giuseppe Taddei, who preceded him, or Thomas Hampson, who succeeded him. The late Rus-

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<sup>8</sup> Detels, Claire Janice, *Giuseppe Verdi’s “Simon Boccanegra”: A Comparison of the 1857 and 1881 Versions*. University of Washington, 1982, pp. 3-5.

sian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky was also an excellent Boccanegra; but many and many a singer who has attempted the role has fallen short, just as most Italian baritones do not sing Rodrigo in *Don Carlo* very well.

Some of the revisions were purely musical, such as the new introduction to Amelia's entrance aria, which now has flute passages suggesting waves of water in the canals of Venice, while others, particularly the all-new "council chamber scene," were extensive and outstanding. Detels viewed even the revised *Boccanegra* as inferior to *Il trovatore* or *La traviata*. In terms of his having created a more organic whole, this is undoubtedly true, but in terms of creating a truly dramatic opera as opposed to melodramatic operas, it is not.

Indeed, there are many wonderful things in *Boccanegra* that surpass not only *Trovatore* and *Traviata*, but even *Rigoletto*, like the entire scene following the Amelia-Boccanegra duet. This is so tightly written, and so continuous in its musical development, that it not only matches the dramatic situation but actually makes it *more* dramatic. Moreover, Verdi manages to elicit more drama out of the mysterious identity of Amelia-Maria, which, at least in his version, does play a pivotal role in the eventual outcome of the drama.

I also believe—and this is simply my opinion—that after composing *Forza* and *Aida*, and having revised this opera in the midst of his *Otello* negotiations with Boito—that Verdi wanted an even heavier tenor for Gabriele than in the original version. The new music written for his character leans towards a real *spinto* with a cut, possibly due to his admiration for Francesco Tamagno (who, remember, sang Don Carlo in the revised four-act Italian version of *that* opera). This is not insignificant; it marks a shift in preference for this type of tenor voice. As I say, each era of operatic history had its own paradigms of what was dramatic and what was not, and this was in the wind during this period of operatic history. And the new finale is deeply moving in addition to being dramatically effective.

For me, the biggest flaw in even the revised *Simon Boccanegra* is that the title character too often just reacts to each new situation; he never really takes control and he doesn't seem to learn from previous mistakes. But taken on his own terms, he is clearly a three-dimensional character and not a two-dimensional one like di Luna in *Il trovatore* or even Germont père in *La traviata*.

The best commercial recording of this opera, on balance, is the one with Dmitri Hvorostovsky (Simon), Ildar Abdrazakov (Fiesco), Barbara Frittoli (Amelia/Maria) and Stefano Secco (Gabriele), conducted by Constantine Orbelian, but for me the most dramatic performances are live ones, the 1939 Met Opera broadcast with Lawrence Tibbett (Simon), Ezio Pinza (Fiesco), Elisabeth Rethberg (Amelia) and Giovanni Martinelli (Gabriele), well conducted by Ettore Panizza, and the 1964 Italian broadcast with Giuseppe Taddei (Simon), Raphael Ariè (Fiesco), Claudia Parada (Amelia) and Robleto Merolla (Gabriele), conducted by Fernando Previtali.

### **Massenet: *Le Cid* (1885)**

Following on the heels of his immensely popular opera *Manon* (1884), which although mostly entertaining music was an important paradigm shift away from Wagner's Norse fantasies and Verdi's historical dramas to a relationship that was somewhat more on the level of everyday life, Jules Massenet (1842-1912) decided to write a grand opéra. He lit on the subject of the Spanish soldier Rodrigue, who is made a knight by King Alfonso VI. Rodrigue and Chimène, daughter of the Comte de Gormas, are in love with each other and plan to wed. This is fine by her father, but the fly in the ointment is that the infante (princess) also loves Rodrigue but, due to her high standing, is not allowed to marry a mere knight. Another problem is that, after Rodrigue is made a knight, the king names his father, Don Diegue, as governor, which Count Gormas sees as a slap in the face. Chimène thus turns against Rodrigue. Things get so bad that her father chal-

lenges him to a duel; Rodrigue considers letting the count kill him to avoid Chimène's anger and hatred, but in the end he kills the count. Don Diegue insists that his son take the place of the dead count in battle while Rodrigue begs the king for a day of grace in which he will return victorious in battle. Chimène demands that Rodrigue be punished for killing her father, but to no avail; Rodrigue comes to say goodbye to her before going into battle, sad that she now hates him. As he is leaving, she tells him to return victorious in order to cover his sins.

Deserting soldiers lie to Don Diegue, saying that Rodrigue was killed in battle. He tells the infante and Chimène, who mourn for him, but fanfares announce Rodrigue's success in battle and he returns victorious. He is now named Le Cid by the chiefs of the vanquished moors. The king offers him rewards, but he answers that only Chimène can decide his fate, and since she can neither demand his punishment nor pardon him, he draws his sword to kill himself. Needless to say, Chimène relents and pardons him; they get married and everyone is happy.

*Le Cid* was enormously popular from the time of its premiere until the end of World War I, in 1919, but then fell off the operatic cliff and was not heard from again for almost a century except for the recording I will mention, which was a concert performance (not staged) in May 1976. In one respect, it was an anachronism, a grand opéra harking back to the glory days of Gounod and Meyerbeer, but in another it was almost as much a milestone as Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*, for in this score Massenet poured some of his finest and most creative music, fusing art and entertainment in a manner that would never be seen again. Melodic the music was, but as with Verdi's *Aïda*, *Le Cid* was a new twist on an old form. Even the overture, which is sometimes played in concert, is brilliantly and tightly written, using harmonic changes and subtleties that would never have occurred to either Gounod or Meyerbeer prior to their discovery of Wagner. Moreover, much of the score of *Le Cid* is continuous, which is something that Gounod never achieved and Meyerbeer only to some extent in his masterpiece, *Le Prophète*.

I hear several resemblances in *Le Cid* to *Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser* and even *Lohengrin* (parts of Chimène's lines in the first scene sound remarkably like some of Elsa's), only "Frenchified" and poured into new bottles. In this respect, too, *Le Cid* was a bit of a throwback, since those three Wagner operas all preceded *Tristan*, the *Ring des Nibelungen* and *Parsifal*, but musical brilliance is musical brilliance. Had *Le Cid* been written in 1859 instead of 1884-85, it would surely have been hailed as a masterpiece. Listen, for instance, to Massenet's creative way of using the trumpet fanfares in the opening scene: a few playing onstage, but the others offstage, and he then uses the rhythm of the fanfares as the basis for his sung recitative scene. Even the brief but interesting infante/Chimène duet is woven into the music's structure without a hitch. And although the music is lyrical, it carries the meaning of the text surprisingly well.

Indeed, the longer you listen to *Le Cid*, the more wrapped up in it you become. Choruses, ariettas, duets and recitatives all flow like a river. Had *Manon* been this continuous and this creative, it would surely also be considered a masterpiece and not just a "popular opera." After Rodrigue's brief outburst "Ô noble lame," for instance, one hears a halo of soft, high muted strings enfold around his voice like a halo of sound. Even Wagner didn't think of that one for *Lohengrin*. Many of Massenet's effects in this opera are, in fact, musical ones, and although his orchestra is somewhat heavy it is scored like a French orchestra, with greater emphasis on the wind and string blends than on the brass.

Massenet's inspiration never flagged in this opera. Each scene in each act has its own unique character; at the beginning of Act II, during Rodrigue's monologue (not really an aria), he shifts the balance of the orchestra away from the high strings and winds to lower strings and trombones to give more weight to the scene. The ensuing duet between Rodrigue and the Comte de Gormas, leading to the duel, is full of dark portent; trembling strings announce the duel proper; staccato chords from the orchestra punctuate his being run through with Rodrigue's sword.

The count's death scene, set in a minor key with slowly falling chromatics, is also very effective. As Chimène discovers the body of her dead father, an offstage chorus sings a brief *Requiem*. The music becomes faster, tighter, and more dramatic as her voice rises to a *forte* climax; then the chorus, now singing *a cappella*, followed by low brass and tympani to close out the scene.

Even the ballet music in *Le Cid* is good, the most popular piece in it being the famous "Castillane." Following this is the highly charged scene in which Chimène calls for revenge and Don Diegue weighs in, and this is about as dramatic a scene as Massenet ever wrote, although the concerted scene that follows, which includes Rodrigue and the king, is also excellent.

In the last act, we hear Chimène superb (but not conventionally tuneful) aria, "De cet affreux combat je sors," which is strongly reminiscent of *Samson et Dalila*, as well as Rodrigue's superb aria, "O souverain, o juge, o père." which even after the opera's demise was often a showpiece for French tenors.

And yet, sad to say, it's easy to see why *Le Cid* fell out of favor. By the end of World War I, not just this work but all grand operas except the ever-popular *Faust* were considered dinosaurs. They demanded enormous sets and large casts (including big choral forces), and as good as *Le Cid's* music is, it clearly lacks *Faust's* mass appeal. In short, it was, like Meyerbeer's *Prophète*, too good an opera to have sustained popularity. And yet, *Manon* and the even trashier *Thaïs* persisted in popularity. There's just no accounting for an audience's tastes.

There is only one commercial recording of the opera, but fortunately it's a good one, featuring Grace Bumbry (Chimène), Eleanor Bergquist (Infante), Placido Domingo (Rodrigue) in surprisingly good, open voice, Paul Plishka (Don Diegue) and Jake Gardner (King Alfonso), conducted by Eve Queler.

### ***Mussorgsky: Khovanshchina* (1886)**

Meanwhile, back in Russia, Mussorgsky had been plugging away at his latest operatic attempt, *Khovanshchina*. He had also made a go at another opera, *Sorochinsky Fair*, but hadn't completed that one, either. As it turned out, *Khovanshchina* wasn't quite completed when he died either, but at least he had the score on his desk under his lifeless body when he was found, and miraculously, he had completed all but the last few pages of the piano-vocal score and had actually started on the orchestration. Rimsky-Korsakov, of course, finished it for him. In the 20th century, Dmitri Shostakovich wrote a more effective orchestration for it and Igor Stravinsky, of all people, rescored the last act using Mussorgsky's instructions more closely.<sup>9</sup>

Even moreso than *Boris Godunov*, *Khovanshchina* is a sprawling opera with a quite complex plot that, for the most part, only Russians would understand. Set in 1682 Moscow, it opens with two soldiers of the Strelsky (Russian military unit) singing their drunkenness off by recalling the previous night's rowdy activities. The Boyar Shaklovity, dictates a letter to the court warning that a rebellion is planned by Prince Ivan Khovansky, captain of the Strelsky, and the Old Believers, Eastern Orthodox Christians who keep to the old version of their religion before the reforms of Patriarch Nikon between 1653 and 1666—which mostly concerned whether their 12-hour Easter Day processions would go clockwise or counter-clockwise. (I *told* you this was very Russian-centric!) The scribe to whom he dictates the letter, afraid of being somehow implicated in political intrigue, signs the letter with a false name. A crowd enters, however, and forces the scribe to read a new proclamation describing atrocities committed by the Strelsky. Then Prince Ivan himself comes on the scene, telling his adoring crowd that he will defend the young

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<sup>9</sup> This dated from 1913, when Serge Diaghlev wanted to mount a production of the opera for Feodor Chaliapin. He commissioned Ravel and Stravinsky to rewrite the orchestration, which they did, but Chaliapin refused to sing it unless they used the Rimsky-Korsakov score because he didn't like it.

Czars, Ivan V and Peter I. In Act II, a nervous nobleman named Golitsin, reads gushing letters from his lover and also letters from his mother warning him to stay pure.

Prince Andrey, Khovansky's son, chases the young German woman Emma with the intent of assaulting her. Marfa, his former fiancée, stops him and is then threatened by Andrey. Meanwhile, Khovansky has decided to capture Emma for himself. Dosifey, the leader of the Old Believers asks his followers to join him in reuniting Russia. Meanwhile, Golitsin asks Marfa to tell his fortune; she predicts that he will lose power and be exiled. He rejects her prediction and orders his servant to kill her, but is confronted by Khovansky, and Dosifey stops them. Shaklovity tells Khovansky that the Tsar is aware of the rebellion and is looking to arrest him.

In a later scene, Khovansky is murdered by Shaklovity; Golitsin is exiled as the conspirators fall. Marfa and Dosifey agree to immolate themselves at the close of the opera.

The musical language and inflections of *Khovanshchina* are clearly related to *Boris*, but a bit more advanced in style. With so many characters and a more complicated plotline, Mussorgsky had to work out a basic outline to begin with, then fashion the libretto, and then start composing music to it. The prelude, surprisingly, is more lyrical and legato in style and phrasing than the one for *Boris*, despite crashing percussion and bells in the midst of it. The parlando recitative passages for the characters also remind one of *Boris*, with each one's music tailored to fit the situation.

One could go into much more detail about the music, but those who are familiar with *Boris Godunov* will have a good idea of Mussorgsky's methods here as well. The point is that, although *Khovanshchina* is an interesting opera and the music matches the dramatic situations extremely well, it's not a plot that travels well. Boris Godunov's hunger for power and his drive to hold on to it as long as he could by brute force is the sort of thing that can apply to many political situations nowadays, but the only analogy that can be made in modern times to the desires of the Old Believers to establish their own Czar is, perhaps, the drive of conservative Christians across the world to take power away from what the majority want—which is not what *they* want—and force others to buckle under the demands of their religion. Even so, the very complex interactions of nobility and commoners in this opera simply relate to the time and place of the libretto. This makes *Khovanshchina* much more of a “period piece” than *Boris*, despite some truly extraordinary music, such as the chorus in the first act, a clear advance on his choral writing for *Boris*. In this score, the music flows smoother than in *Boris*, the scenes being connected with far greater musical skill. Wagner may not have known that Mussorgsky ever existed, but by the late 1870s it's clear that the latter knew who the former was.

Another analogy one could make between Wagner and Mussorgsky is that the orchestra has much more to say, and in fact carries the *musical* end of the opera better than the singers' lines. Of course, our perception of the orchestra here is dependent on others' writing, since Mussorgsky didn't get very far in scoring the opera, but he apparently had long conversations on this topic with Rimsky-Korsakov, who was his closest and most sympathetic friend, thus I am convinced that in this opera he wanted a somewhat more Western-sounding orchestra to match the moods of the work. Even Shostakovich and Stravinsky thought so.

If the first act does not convince you of this, I think the second act will. Aside from the yelling of one sect against another, much of the music for solo singers is closer to what Mussorgsky wrote in the “Polish act” of *Boris*, such as Marfa's aria—here, woven into the ongoing flow of the music, rather different from Marina's solos in *Boris*. Then listen to the ballet piece, the “Danze persiane,” in Act IV. Mussorgsky never wrote anything remotely like this in his earlier works. Although this is very much an ensemble opera, the most important role is that of Dosifey, leader of the Old Believers. He must come across as a man of such strength and persuasion that it is almost impossible to refuse to follow him. He is the lynchpin around which the rest of the

cast—a much more extensive list of characters than in *Boris*—revolves like satellites around a massive planet. Of the supporting cast, the most important role is that of Marfa, a leader of the heretics; her duet with Dosifei in Act III is one of the finest dramatic scenes Mussorgsky ever wrote, similar in concept to the Marina-Rangoni duet in *Boris* but in a different style (not too far from the Fricka-Wotan duet in Act II of *Die Walküre*), and if both singers do not have stature, the whole piece falls flat—as it usually does in modern performances.

In *Khovanshchina*, the pitiful whining of the Simpleton is replaced by the pitiful whining of a Scribe, who is forced to write down and send politically explosive missives to various people but is loath to sign his name to them for fear of being thrown into prison or killed. As in the case of the Simpleton, the role calls for a high, thin tenor with a solid technique but the ability to sound less like a trained voice than the other tenors. This was an innovation all Mussorgsky's own, although some critics have likened the Simpleton to Mime in the *Ring* cycle, and it would come to play a more important part in the creation of future operatic roles.

There are but two stereo/digital recordings of *Khovanshchina*, both of which were released as both videos and audio CDs. The earlier of them is the highly celebrated Claudio Abbado version with Paata Burchuladze (Dosifei), Aage Haugland (Ivan Khovansky), Vladimir Atlantov (Andrei Khovansky), Marjana Lipovšek (Marfa), Heinz Zednik (Scribe) and Vladimir Popov (Golitsyn); this uses the Shostakovich orchestration for most of the opera with the Stravinsky ending. The later one, conducted by Valery Gergiev, features Nikolai Ohotnikov (Dosifei), Bulat Menjelkiev (Ivan Khovansky), Vladimir Galusin (Andrei Khovansky), Olga Borodina (Marfa), Constantin Pluzhnikov (Scribe) and Alexei Steblianko (Golitsyn). Both casts have defective voices, but Gergiev's cast is for the most part simply awful while Abbado's is only moderately so, and Abbado uses the Stravinsky ending while Gergiev does not, thus my preference is for the former.

However, if you want the most consistently dramatic and well-sung performance, despite mono sound and the Rimsky orchestration with the endings of Acts II and V being louder than Mussorgsky wanted, you need to have the 1979 Bolshoi with Evgeny Nesterenko (Dosifei), Alexander Vedernikov (Ivan Khovansky), Georgy Andryushchenko (Andrei Khovansky), Irina Arkhipova (Marfa), Vitaly Vlasov (Scribe) and Evgeny Raikov (Golitsyn), conducted with great conviction by Yuri Simonov at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p5sWAVOi94>. This is not a first-choice performance due to the mono sound and the orchestration, but it will satisfy you dramatically (and vocally) better than the other two listed above.

### **Verdi: *Otello* (1887)**

We move now to yet another masterpiece, albeit one that suffers from a bit too much compression of the original play on which it is based. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago is a much more complex character, and Othello's mistrust of others and his sensitivity towards being betrayed is better explained by his agonizingly slow rise to the top as a trusted general due to his race and unseen forces who tried to thwart it. None of this was beyond Arrigo Boito's powers as a librettist, but Verdi, more pragmatic about protracted character development after the sting of *Don Carlos*, chose to make *Otello* a taut dramatic structure rather than a more expansive one. Considering his goals, then, he and Boito did a terrific job. Anyone who has seen a stage performance of *Otello* knows one thing: the whole opera moves like greased lightning on the stage, and as scene follows scene nearly everything except Iago's "Credo," a set piece that unfortunately reduces his stature from that of a very complex conniver to that of melodrama villain, makes perfect sense both musically and dramatically. The lone complaint one can make of *Otello* is that the plot hangs together just long enough for everything to happen as it does, and coincidence plays a large part in its working.





Although Verdi and Boito did not, in my opinion, bring out enough of Otello's background to explain his always having to watch his back, they did bring out the dual nature of his character. Otello is always on the verge of exploding in rage, particularly when he feels he is being manipulated, yet his Achilles heel is that he doesn't seem to realize that Iago is "playing" him because they have been through so much together that Otello trusts him.

The point I am making is that, although it is possible to just read through the score of *Otello* and see it as excellent musical drama, this isn't half as good as hearing a committed cast and conductor pull it off.

There are several great recordings of *Otello*, but all predating the modern era, largely because no one in our time other than José Cura had the proper voice and temperament for Otello, and his recording (issued on video only) was made a decade after his vocal decline began. I particularly like these three for their totality in presenting both the music and the characters well: Ramón Vinay (Otello), Giuseppe Valdengo (Iago) and Herva Nelli (Desdemona), conducted by Arturo Toscanini, a performance in which he tried to simulate the singing and vocal acting of the world premiere (in which he played cello in the orchestra); Jon Vickers (Otello), Gian-Piero Mastromei (Iago, often mistakenly identified as Louis Quilico), and Raina Kabaivanska (Desdemona), conducted by Bohuslav Klobučar; and the 1978 Metropolitan Opera DVD (at this writing, also available on YouTube) with Vickers (Otello), Cornell MacNeil (Iago) and Renata Scotto (Desdemona), conducted in fiery fashion by James Levine. You can safely ignore the many Plácido Domingo recordings of this opera; his undersized, strained voice completely diminishes the title role.

**Massenet: *Werther*** (1887, premiered 1892)

Shortly after the premiere of *Le Cid*, Massenet began work on *Werther*. This was, of course, based on Goethe's early novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), which is considered the first Romantic novel but also spurred, in its time, a rash of suicides by loves-struck young men. Charlotte, the eldest child of a widowed bailiff, is going to a dress ball but since her fiancée Albert is away, her father has asked a somewhat gloomy young man named Werther to be her escort. Upon his arrival, Werther sees the charming way in which Charlotte interacts with her younger siblings and begins to fall in love with her. Before they return from the ball, however, Albert arrives unexpectedly after a six-month trip. Charlotte and Werther come home rather late, the latter openly declaring his love for her, but she tells him that she promised her dying mother that she would marry Albert.

Three months later, after Albert and Charlotte are married, they go to church but are followed by the gloomy Werther. Both Charlotte and her younger sister Sophie try to cheer him up, but Werther still approaches Charlotte as she is leaving church, professing his undying love for her and threatens suicide if his love is not reciprocated. Albert finally gets the hint that Werther is his wife's own personal stalker.

Home alone on Christmas Eve, Charlotte is re-reading Werther's letters to her, wondering about his current state of mind but also wondering how she was able to refuse him, since she does have feelings for him. Werther suddenly shows up, and while reading her a poem by Ossian (a fictional creator of epic poems, actually written by Scottish author James Macpherson) she realizes that she does indeed love him, yet although they embrace for a moment, she knows that she is now married and so their relationship cannot continue. After Albert comes home, Werther writes to him and asks to borrow his pistols, saying that he is going on a hunting trip. Albert loans him the pistols, Werther shoots himself, and Charlotte arrives at his apartment to find him dying. She admits her love for him, he asks for forgiveness, and dies in her arms as a children's chorus is heard singing Christmas carols outside.

Even in 1887, more than a century after the book's publication, *Werther* was considered a bit risky to produce onstage as an opera, thus Massenet had to wait five years to see it staged. In this work, he tried to sugar-coat the story with some lovely music, but in a way this opera, like Verdi's *Rigoletto*, was also a form of *chiaroscuro*, mixing light and dark elements. Werther's music has an underlying edgy quality about it that tells the listener that he is not quite stable emotionally. This was undoubtedly the reason for its delay in being produced on stage; and, not surprisingly, it did not take place in France, but in Austria at the Imperial Theater Hofoper, the libretto translated into German. The Paris premiere did not occur until a year later, and not at the Paris Opéra but at the lesser Théâtre Lyrique on the Place du Châtelet. Interestingly, the first Werther was Ernest van Dyck, a famous Heldentenor who, two years previously, had sung Parsifal at Bayreuth. He left us a recording of Werther's famous aria, "Pourquoi ma réveiller": very obviously a fine voice, sung with excellent nuance, but with very little interpretation. Charlotte was created by one Marie Renard, who never made a recording. Her voice category was described as "chanteuse," a range in between a soprano and a mezzo-soprano. Both sopranos and mezzos have sung the role in performances and on recordings. Later on, Massenet rewrote the role of Werther in the baritone range at the request of the famous Italian baritone Mattia Battistini, but it is rarely sung by baritones nowadays.

The opening orchestral prelude is actually quite dark music in the minor, focusing on low strings and winds, though it later switches to the major and a sweet lyrical theme, evidently contrasting Werther's personality with Charlotte's. The opening scene is also all sweetness and light, introducing the bailiff and his cronies Johann and Schmidt. We suddenly switch to the minor, and a theme played by low strings, to introduce Werther. Even at this early point in the opera, he sounds quite intense, as if his mind is operating on a different plane from the others. Much of the music is in the sort of semi-parlando style that Massenet had experimented with in *Manon* and perfected in *Le Cid*, and once again, the scenes are musically connected.

I'm sure that several readers will, by this point, complain that the "drama" in *Werther* is quite mild compared to those works we have discussed in this chapter. I will agree with you, but there are different kinds of drama, and *Werther* is dramatic on a much more intimate level than those other operas. Although the production was, of course, updated to the early 19th century from the late 18th, *Werther* was an opera that, again, filled a need that was rising up in opera audiences for stories on a more intimate level than those of Dons, Dukes, Kings and Princes and their love interests. The first Charlotte-Werther duet in Act I already moves us away from the candy-cane music of the first scene; there is a certain sensual tension in this duet, with its rising harmonic line behind Werther's sudden outburst of love for Charlotte, that tells us something is happening, even if just on a subconscious level. Smartly, Massenet's orchestration is also on the light side; with so much of this sung-recit style pitched in the middle of the singers' vocal ranges, anything heavier would cover them up too much. Even more so than *Manon*, *Werther* is a "conversational" opera, clearly a precursor to Charpentier's *Louise*.

In short, *Werther* is a Romantic love opera with a psychological twist, and Massenet was extremely intelligent to try to sugar-coat Werther's almost psychotic fixation on Charlotte in such a way as to make it seem at least a little like normal love to the casual listener. Had he gone any further than he did, it would surely have been more "dramatic," but it also would have brought Werther's mania into the open, and this would have actually unbalanced the story from a dramatic standpoint. Those little orchestral outbursts, either behind Werther's sung lines or by themselves, as in the final scene of Act II, are enough to indicate what is going on in his mind.

The third-act prelude also opens quite intensely in the minor, indicating a portent of the drama to come. When done properly, Charlotte's letter-reading scene can indeed be very dramatic—but again, one must be careful to only let one's emotions explode on occasion, as much of

the drama lies under the surface. When Sophie arrives, there is a nice tension between the younger sister's charming naïveté and the older's suppressed passion. Everything in this act, from Werther's "Pourquoi ma rêveiller" onward, builds up into passionate climaxes from which Massenet suddenly pulls back, only to have the passion rebuilt yet again. And the final scene between Charlotte and Werther is perfectly balanced between passion and pathos without becoming too maudlin in scope. The contrast between the Christmas revelers (including Sophie) outside and Werther dying inside was a brilliant idea in contrast.

The best recording I've yet heard of the complete opera is the one with Marcus Haddock (Werther), Béatrice Uria-Monzon (Charlotte), René Massis (Albert) and Jaël Azzaretti (Sophie), conducted by Jean-Claude Casadesus. The best historic recording is the old 1931 version with Ninon Vallin (Charlotte), Georges Thill (Werther), Germaine Féraldy (Sophie) and Marcel Roque (Albert), conducted by Elie Cohen.

### ***Tchaikovsky: Pique Dame [The Queen of Spades] (1890)***

By the time Piotr Ilitch Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) wrote this opera, he had been a successful composer for more than a dozen years, but primarily successful outside his native country. Quite aside from other Russian composers, many in his native audience considered his music too Western in both form and harmony to appeal to them although his 1880 opera *Eugene Onegin* and his wildly successful *1812 Overture*, both of which used Russian themes as their basis, had a strong following in his native country. *Onegin*, like *Carmen* and many other quite good but not inherently dramatic works of its time, had some dramatic scenes, particularly the final duet between Tatiana and Onegin in the last act, but with *Pique Dame* he made a concerted effort to connect with his own people.

The libretto was written by his brother Modest Tchaikovsky, based on an 1834 novella of the same name by the greatest of all 19th-century Russian writers, Alexander Pushkin. The plot revolves around a Russian officer named Herman (sometimes spelled Gherman) who is obsessed with gambling but loses far more than he wins. Typically of the Romantic era, he "loves" a woman from afar who he has never met and doesn't even know what her name is; she turns out to be Lisa, the fiancée of Prince Yeletsky. Herman also overhears other officers discussing the Countess, known as the Queen of Spades, who was extremely lucky at gambling in her youth by trading sexual favors for the "Secret" formula to gaming taught her by Count St. Germain in Paris. Tomsy, one of the soldiers, reveals that only two men, her husband and later a young lover, ever learned the secret of playing those three cards because she was warned by a fortune teller that if she revealed the secret to a third person it would cost her her life.

The rest of the opera concerns Herman's relentless pursuit of Lisa (or Lisa) and his drive to learn the Countess' secret gambling formula. Lisa is at first apprehensive of Herman but eventually becomes deeply attracted to him. Since she is the Countess' granddaughter, she has the keys to her abode, and gives them to Herman. He enters the Countess' bedroom, draws a pistol and threatens her life if she won't tell him her gambling secret. The old woman, frightened, purposely gives him the wrong answer, but then dies of a heart attack from fright. Lisa rushes in and finds her dead—knowing who is to blame. Lisa and Herman arrange a midnight tryst, before which she worries that he does not really love her as much as she loves him. When he arrives, he gives her assurance but then starts babbling about the Countess and the three cards and doesn't even seem to recognize her. Falling into a deep depression, Lisa commits suicide after he leaves.

Yet somehow, even without learning the Countess' secret, Herman is suddenly wildly successful at cards. He first bets 40,000 rubles and wins, using the Countess' "wrong" formula. He then bets again and wins, upsetting the others with his maniacal expressions. Herman then bets everything he has on the ace of spades, but when he is forced to show his hand he is holding not

the ace but the queen of spades. Hearing the ghost of the Countess laughing at him, Herman begs Lisa's and Yeletsky's forgiveness and kills himself.

Onto this grisly plot, Tchaikovsky poured his greatest operatic music. Yes, some of it was Western in form, but much of it drew from Russian culture, and his harmonic audacity in this opera was a large part of what made it so excellent. Even the overture is audacious in this respect, with hard-driving rhythms and rising chromatic passages interspersed with his usual lyricism. It was still recognizably Tchaikovsky, but an entirely new Tchaikovsky.

Not surprisingly, the opera was a sensation in Russia and was soon performed in Kiev and Moscow; its first performance outside Russia was in Prague, its first performance in the West at Vienna in 1902, conducted by Gustav Mahler. But its reception outside of Eastern European countries was not as enthusiastic; the music and plot were "too gloomy" for many Westerners. Mahler also brought it to the Metropolitan Opera in 1910, sung in German; the first London performance was in 1915 (sung in Russian), conducted by Vladimir Rosing. Yet it took decades for audience to catch on and appreciate it properly.

The opening scenes with Herman also signal a change. Yes, the music is still lyrical, but much more in minor keys and constructed primarily of "arioso" or semi-parlando lines that never quite coalesce into arias or duets, though they encompass a bit of both. And here, the music is continuous, developing in long lines, during which Tchaikovsky's invention never flags. One watches and listens spellbound as this music runs by your ears. Lyrical, yes; but "easy" or trashy music, no, not one note of it. Everything is geared to the meaning of the words in the text. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that both Tchaikovsky's music and his brother Modest's transfer of Pushkin's novella into a workable libretto are as compact and brilliant as what Verdi and Boito did with *Otello*. Changes of rhythm and, at times, sharply syncopated accents played by the strings with strong downbow action, also help to keep the aural climate both interesting and changing. Even the little song at the beginning of the second act, charming and tuneful, seems to fit in, providing a moment's respite from the tense psychological drama of Herman's wild, high-pitched obsession.

We thus have, in this opera, a Russian application of both Mozart's *chiaroscuro* and Wagner's continuous musical lines, the most dramatic portions of the score being high-pitched and intense but played against some conventionally lyric (but not insipid) sections. Even Yeletsky's aria in Act II, declaring his love for Lisa, is a good one, and the scene between Hermann and the Countess has a darkness in its use of low instruments and slow, minor-key motifs reminiscent of the Philip-Inquisitor scene from *Don Carlos*. Yet Tchaikovsky saved one of his most moving passages for last: after Herman's suicide, the strings play softly and the chorus intones a Russian prayer as moving as the one in *Boris Godunov*.

One of the great fascinations of *Pique Dame* is that the love-affair angle is by no means conventional; in her own way, Lisa is just as mentally and emotionally unstable as Herman. I don't think you can name me another Romantic opera where both lovers kill themselves, particularly for different reasons. In this respect both *Werther* and *Pique Dame* were harbingers of the dark psychological dramas to come in the next century, which made audiences' skin crawl. Something overt like love-jealousy they could understand; someone who was not quite all there in the head, and acted out of insane or borderline insane motives, made them very uncomfortable.

As in the case of *Otello*, we are extremely fortunate to have excerpts from this opera recorded by the singers who created the roles, the great Russian tenor Nikolai Figner as Herman and his wife, the Italian soprano Medea Mei-Figner, as Lisa. Although illness had diminished Nikolai Figner's tone before he made most of his recordings, one cannot escape the fact that this was a truly great artist, not only a fine musician but a great singing actor (he was highly admired by

Chaliapin), and his wife, who had a rich, creamy voice which she kept into the late 1920s, was also a fine stage actress.

We are also fortunate that there are several outstanding performances of this opera available to choose from, among them the Vladimir Fedoseyev recording with Vitaly Tarashchenko (Herman), Natalia Datsko (Lisa), Dmitri Hvorostovsky (Yeletsky), Irina Arkhipova (Countess) and Alexander Vedernikov (Surin); the live performance with Vladimir Atlantov (Herman), Julia Varady (Lisa), Dodo Brinkman (Yeletsky), Elena Obraztsouva (Countess) and Karl Helm (Surin), conducted somewhat too fast, but excitingly, by Algis Shraitis, but for me the most thrilling performance is the live one with Vladimir Atlantov (Herman), Mirella Freni (Lisa, a rare Russian role for her), Vladimir Chernov (Yeletzky) and Sergei Leiferkus (Tomsy), with star turns by a young Vesselina Kasarova as Pauline and an astounding performance of the Countess by 80-year-old Martha Mödl, conducted by Seiji Ozawa. Avoid the Ozawa commercial recording with Atlantov and Freni; on a level of dramatic intensity, it's only a six whereas the live performance is a ten.

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We now move on to the next problem period of opera, the so-called “verismo” era, although even here there were some bright spots in an otherwise crowd-pleasing style, and during this exact same period, other composers were breaking the mold to create musically and dramatically interesting works that would soon take over the field. Audiences didn't like it, and in fact complained bitterly, forcing other, lesser composers to fill the void with the tuneful treacle they preferred, but the handwriting was on the wall.