

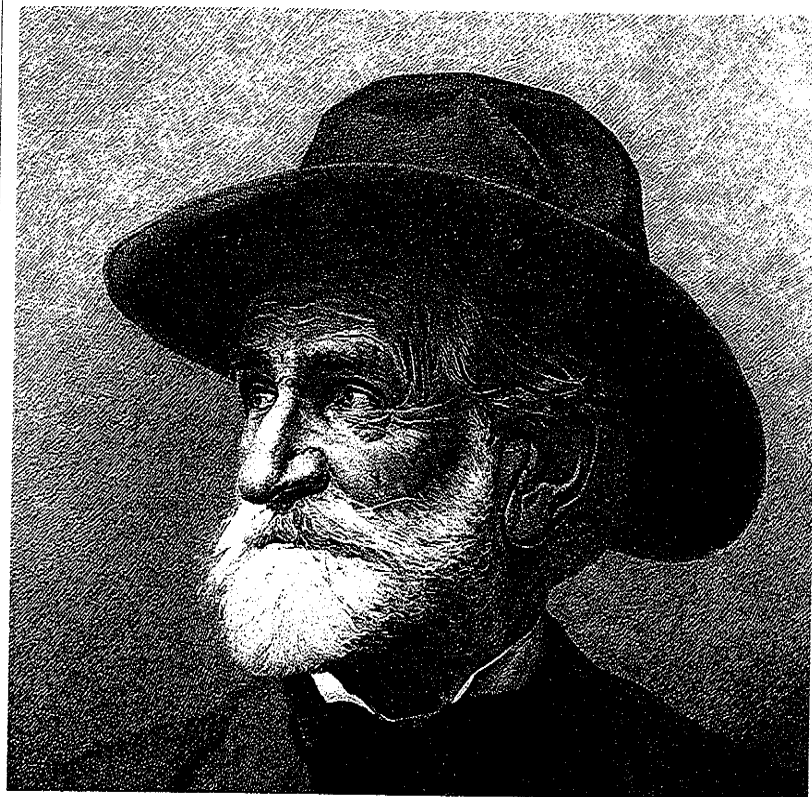


GIUSEPPE VERDI

# OTELLO

MYUNG-WHUN CHUNG





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(1813-1901)

# OTELLO

Dramma lirico in quattro atti  
Opera in four acts · Oper in vier Akten  
Opéra en quatre actes

Libretto/Livret: Arrigo Boito  
dalla tragedia di /based on the tragedy by / nach der Tragödie von /  
d'après la tragédie de Shakespeare

## Orchestre et Chœurs de l'Opéra Bastille

Chorus Master and Musical Assistance/Choreinstudierung und Musikalische Assistenz/  
Chef des chœurs et Assistant musical/Maestro del coro e Assistente musicale: Denis Dubois

Maîtrise des Hauts-de-Seine /Chœur d'enfants de l'Opéra de Paris  
(Boy's choir of the Opéra de Paris)

Chorus Master: Francis Bardot  
Italian Language Coach: Tina Ruta

MYUNG-WHUN CHUNG

## "Otello" as *Dramma Lirico*

JAMES A. HEPOKOSKI

With regard to dramatic form – everything numerical, calculated, and reflective – [Verdi] has entirely accepted the laws of the new art," wrote the critic Ugo Capetti of the première of *Otello* on 5 February 1887; "but in ideas: ah! there Verdi has not changed at all. He remains himself ... *Musical Italy is not yet lost!*" Capetti's fervent, yet somewhat astonished reaction to *Otello* was widely shared in Italy. Verdi's aggressive return to the new, "modern" theatre at the age of 73 after an embittered 15-year withdrawal could not have been more welcome: in the years following the 1871–72 *Aida*, written for an operatic world whose foundations were only beginning to tremble, it had appeared that, disillusioned with the loudly polemical "reformist" or "internationalist" turn of musical events in Italy, he had renounced new operatic composition altogether. (In the interim, he had produced the *Requiem* [1874] and a few "modernistic" patches of revision for *Simon Boccanegra* [1881] and *Don Carlos* [1882–3].) On the other hand, younger composers and critics were now strongly tempted by the biological naturalism and intellectual clarity of competing French and Germanic operas, and the Italian première of *Lohengrin* in Bologna in November 1871 – the first Wagnerian incursion into Italy –

may be understood as having struck an ultimately mortal blow to the body of Italian operatic traditions. Even Verdi's moderately progressive *Aida* had been drawn into the fray. To the composer's fury, critical response to it had ranged from Pietro Cominazzi's sneering charge that he was now an "obsequious imitator of Wagner" to the enthusiastic Leone Fortis' insistence that in its progressivism *Aida* was to be hailed as "Il *Lohengrin* italiano."

A product of the 1880s, *Otello* was thus conceived in an increasingly threatened, chaotic operatic world, one swinging outward in ever wider arcs from its melodic center. At stake – and under attack – was the legitimacy of rounded, closed melody: the direct, sunlight-pure vocalism of earlier Italian opera. Now emerging with the last 30 years of the *Ottocento* was a more explicitly self-conscious art: a passion for things "numerical, calculated and reflective", as Capetti put it; a musical practice that justified itself through verbally elaborated aesthetic argumentation; the invalidating of the familiar melodic contours of the old, traditional forms; the appeal of an "up-to-date" orchestral-developmental conception of opera. Conservative and nationalistic Italian critics – and often Verdi himself – feared that the Wagnerian movement would be

an attraction fatal to the interests of a public-oriented, melodic art, a poisoning of the health and distinctiveness of Italian opera. For Verdi (and for his librettist, Arrigo Boito), *Otello* was to be an authoritative manifesto by example. As a *dramma lirico* – a genre musically innovative and flexible, elevated in subject matter, psychologically "realistic", orchestrally and motivically sophisticated, and yet still, above all, emphatically melodic at its core – it was to represent an alternative genre to the Wagnerian music drama. *Otello's* greatness, long recognized, need not be argued here; but we may need to remind ourselves that it is the urgent product of crisis, that it springs from an Italian operatic culture that was nervously questioning its own continued validity and national identity.

The idea of composing *Otello* was not Verdi's. Rather, he had to be tactfully persuaded into it by a trio of friendly plotters, all much younger men: the librettist Arrigo Boito, whose reputation had been that of a torchbearing modernist (and hence for Verdi, at least initially, an object of suspicion); Giulio Ricordi, whose firm would publish the new work; and Franco Faccio, the conductor at the première. The hope was to lure Verdi back into the theatre by offering him an irresistible subject and an irresistible libretto – the most accomplished libretto, in fact, that he had ever seen. Boito traced the outlines of the plot in late June or early July 1879, but although Verdi's curiosity had been roused, he remained reluctant about giving the project his blessing. Nevertheless, the librettist continued to work avidly from July until mid-November to produce a brilliant full draft, brim-

ming over with intricate, provocative wordplay and structural innovations. Upon Verdi's insistence numerous textual revisions would follow over the next seven years. An ardent Shakespearean, Boito had approached the project of condensing *Otello* into an opera in a scholarly, methodical way. He had consulted the original text (he could struggle through English and by 1879 it seems that he owned at least two copies of the English-language *Otello*) and the most obvious Italian translations. But, far more directly important, he had also immersed himself in François-Victor Hugo's translation of *Otello* into French (1860). As Boito's carefully marked copy of this translation reveals (it is now housed in the La Scala library in Milan), this was his principal working edition of Shakespeare. The son of Victor Hugo, the translator had striven for a scrupulously faithful rendering of the original and had included a well-researched 35-page introduction (some of whose arguments may be found reflected in the opera), 22 pages of notes and commentary, and even a translation of the relevant story from Gibaldi Cinzio's *Ecatomitti* (1566), Shakespeare's own source for the story (and an Italian one at that, as Boito and Verdi surely relished).

Boito's *Otello* is a lean, vigorously efficient reworking of the play. Most of the original first (Venetian) act was suppressed in order to begin in Cyprus with the Storm Scene (*Otello*, Act II, scene 1), but fragments of it may be found inserted into some of the opera's first act: for instance, the Iago-Roderigo dialogue following the Victory Chorus and much of the concluding Love Duet. On the other hand, Boito's version includes several

able, strictly "operatic" features not found in Shakespeare. He added three *tableau*-choruses in early acts: the stretta-like Victory Chorus in I, the ensuing Fire Chorus, and the Homage Chorus to Desdemona in Act II. Similarly, he produced an evil, "confessional" solo-piece for Iago in Act II (rewritten in 1884 to become the now-familiar "Credo") and gave Desdemona a poignant "Ave Maria" in the final act, surely an idea suggested by the similarly placed *preghiera* in Verdi's *Otello* (1816). And, largely the result of Verdi's continued prodding in 1880 and 1881, the opera contains a traditional, but expanded, inter-act finale at the end of Act III: it comprises the arrival of the Venetian ambassadors, the public humiliation of Desdemona, a large-ensemble re-entrance, and Othello's final fainting.

The first five years of *Otello*'s genesis, 1879-84, were devoted to textual matters: Verdi remained unwilling to initiate the composition until the libretto had been brought to a state of near-perfection. Although little is known of his compositional process, the later reports of Giuseppe Giacomini and Ricordi seem convincing: he apparently began by reading the libretto aloud, experiencing it first as verbal drama, and then permitting it to flow its way – as a "natural" process – into musical sketches and drafts that recaptured the natural rhythm, accent and nuances. Verdi began the composition of *Otello* in March 1884 – a very hesitant start, as it turned out – and finally produced a draft of the first three acts in Genoa on 1 December 1884 to April 1885. After further significant textual revisions, he produced the final act at Sant'Agata five months later, in Sep-

tember and early October 1885, and immediately turned to the task of orchestration, beginning with the last act. By early 1886 it was clear that *Otello* could be staged the following year at La Scala. Verdi began once again to become involved with the selection of singers: Francesco Tamagno as Othello, a powerful tenor who the composer had originally feared would be unable to deliver some of the sensitive, softer passages; Victor Maurel as Iago, a gifted actor and singer, attractive to Verdi as a commanding stage presence and a superb deliverer of texts; and Romilda Pantaleoni as Desdemona. Verdi completed the orchestration in various stages from late August (Act IV) to early November 1886 (the second half of Act II). After some seven years of intermittent labor Verdi could finally write the famous lines to Boito on 1 November 1886, "It's finished! All honour to us! (and to Him!!)."

As a *dramma lirico* – the "modern" genre of the non-Wagnerians – *Otello* is more stylistically "advanced" than *Aida* was. As a result, Capetti and many other critics concluded that with *Otello* Verdi had abandoned the comfortable formulas and melodic gestures of 19th-century Italian opera. Although this was a somewhat exaggerated claim, the smoothly continuous texture, the unflagging concern with the dramatic-verbal projection of the text, the motivic growth and transformations within an expertly spun web of orchestral and vocal figures (notice throughout Act II, for instance, the variety of subsequent treatments of the initial rotary-triplet figure – an "Iago-identifier"), the instability or volatility of the musical expression, able to accommodate it-

self to fleeting and nearly constant changes of mood – all of these things are signs of a ripe genre readily distinguishable from that of the more predictably schematic, mid-century opera. Verdi's achievement in *Otello* was to accomplish all of this without sacrificing what he believed to be essential to an "Italian" conception of opera: a luminous, sharp-edged clarity of musical thought that does not veer from the dramatic task at hand or lose itself in subjective, purely "musical" elaboration; and a melodic foundation closely attentive to the value of striking dramatic images revealed through the sonorous possibilities of the human voice.

The structural design of Verdi's *dramma lirico* may be understood as a chain of "set pieces" (solos, duets, ensembles, choruses, and so on) of varying orthodoxy and closure, each surrounded by freely motivic transitions on either side: transition-in, central set piece, transition-out (this last eventually merging into a new entrance-transition and hence a new set piece). The opening storm, for instance, has as its internal set piece the 32-bar, *fortissimo* appeal of the chorus, "Dio, fulgor della bufera", whose exit-transition (capped by Othello's magnificent "Esultate!") ultimately yields to the stretta-like Victory Chorus – the second set piece. The first act continues with set pieces at the Fire Chorus ("Fuoco di gioia!"), the strophic Drinking Song ("Inaffia l'ugola" – notice the disintegrating third stanza, the whole similar in structure to the Act IV Willow Song), the Duel (beginning with Iago's aside to Roderigo, "Va al porto, con quanta più possa"), and the Love Duet (a set piece whose formal "beginning" is not Othello's "Già nella

notte densa" but rather the ensuing plunge into memory, Desdemona's "Quando narravi l'esule tua vita").

Depending on the desired dramatic effect, set pieces are either conservatively cast (employing, for instance, the standard, now "naive" AA'BA' or AA'BC melodic patterns, as in much of the chorus's music as well as in Desdemona's poignant "Ave Maria" in Act IV; or evoking the "primitive" duet-*cabaletta* format, as in Othello's and Iago's "Sì, pel ciel" at the end of Act II) or designed more freely to keep pace with intricate action and nuance (as in the flexible Act III Othello-Desdemona duet, "Dio ti giocondi, o sposo"). Freest of all is the music that concludes the opera, beginning with Othello's entrance in Act IV. Here set pieces seem to drop out altogether, although Othello is given a *scena*-like soliloquy of disparate dramatic lines at the end ("Niumi tema"). All of this is the most remarkably experimental music in *Otello*: technique and structure seem to become transparent to reveal a pure, fluid theatre – not traditional "music", not traditional "opera", but Verdian *dramma*.

Three great figures dominate the stage in a triangle of tension. Othello first appears to us as virtually superhuman, produced out of the raging elements of earth, air and water to proclaim an alliance with Heaven ("Esultate!") – one may also note that his proclamation is shortly thereafter celebrated by fire. But it soon becomes apparent that his love for Desdemona is excessive to the point of self-debilitation. Near the end of Act I the heat of this love melts the warrior within and exposes a momentary – and at this point still delicious – loss of

control ("Ah! la gioia m'innonda", leading to the famous "bacio"); by the end of Act II, however, *amor* has decayed into *gelosia*, and Othello has been brought literally to his knees; by the end of Act III he has lost consciousness; at the opera's end he is dead. Boito's and Verdi's Othello skillfully blends elements of August Wilhelm Schlegel's widely read "savage" interpretation of the character with François-Victor Hugo's more elevated, ennobled Moor. Boito's Iago – the consummate deceiver and manipulator – displays more Mephistophelean tints than does his counterpart in the play, as his "unmasking", the Act II "Credo", makes clear. One might have expected this from the composer of the opera *Mefistofele*, but in fact the demonic interpretation of Iago was already well-engrained in 19th-century continental criticism. Virtually paraphrasing Schlegel, for instance, Hugo had written, "He lacks only supernatural powers to be Mephistopheles." Much has been made of Boito's reducing of Iago's motives to a single strand: his having been passed over for promotion. But as a reading of Hugo's preface to his French translation makes clear – particularly in passages marked off by Boito – the opera's Iago is motivated not by any single peripheral cause or overblown suspicion, but rather by a more generalized, gnawing envy of Othello's splendor: "Iago begrudges Othello for being everything that he is not." Hence in his "Credo" – this is the crucial point – Iago denounces the attributes he sees within Othello: the hero's "bacio", "sguardo", "sacrificio", and "onor" are wrenched downward and thrust into the primal mud ("fango originario"), through which materialistic concept

Iago intends to degrade and thus equate all humans. Boito's Desdemona, the selfless adorer of Othello, is a less assertive, less capable figure than in the play. Boito has transformed her into a pure, passive victim, the typically *fin-de-siècle* female character that Ariane Thomalla has identified as the *femme fragile*: her later counterparts would include, for instance, Melisande, Mimi, and Butterfly. The librettist, moreover, is careful to surround her with madonna-like imagery, notable particularly in the Act II Homage Chorus. The point, clearly, is to draw a touching portrait of chaste innocence, the better to maximize the cruel injustice of her murder.

For his part, Verdi intensifies the Othello-Iago-Desdemona dramatic triangle by providing each with an idiosyncratic manner of vocal delivery – and the contrasting musical styles startlingly exemplify the historical context of *Otello*, the crisis of Italian music in the 1870s and 1880s. Verdi tells us that Desdemona's music was conceived as a "melodic line [that] never stops from the first to the last note." She is explicitly equated with a concrete, but doomed, musical style – the spontaneously lyrical – and her strangling is also a savage extinguishing of the melodic. Significantly, her beautiful Willow Song shatters into irregular stream-of-consciousness fragments in its third strophe, and, in effect, her dramatic final "addio" to Emilia and subsequent "Ave Maria" bid a moving farewell to a whole tradition of Italian opera, "nell'ora della morte". Iago is her musical opposite: he embodies the anti-lyrical, the destructive, the coldly intellectual, the calculated. "Iago must only declaim and snicker", wrote

Verdi. Or again, "In that part it is necessary neither to sing nor to raise one's voice (with few exceptions)." That Boito, in effect, allows Iago to "escape" at the end is ominously apt, for this is the escape of the principle of disorder. The musical delivery of the tormented Othello lurches wildly between that of Desdemona and Iago: he "must sing and howl", as Verdi explained. He sings lyrically, spontaneously, when living in or recalling his "old" world of feeling and the power of his love for Desdemona (for instance, in much of the Love Duet – his union with her in the sharing of his "E tu m'amavi per le mie sventure" melody seems particularly telling; in portions of "Ora e per sempre addio" and "Dio! mi potevi scagliar"; and so on); but in his unchecked suspicions and ravings he is brutally wrenched away from the me-

lodic. As he thus joins Iago in profaning, then killing, the lyrical, we may hear with our own ears that he has become "one whose hand,/Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away/Richer than all his tribe". *Otello*, of course, was intended neither as a simplistic allegory nor as a veiled commentary on music-historical events, but, perhaps unwittingly, it acts out the path – the unavoidable path – of Italian opera in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its essential argument is the irreversibility of the loss of innocence, a theme captured perfectly by Shakespeare's Othello as he reflects upon Desdemona's departure in Act III: "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul/But I do love thee; and when I love thee not,/Chaos is come again."

## Synopsis

The setting is a seaport on Cyprus at the end of the 15th century, when the island was under the control of the Republic of Venice.

### ACT ONE

It is night. A storm is raging, and the people of the town are at the quayside, watching anxiously for the arrival of their new Governor, the Moor

Othello. His ship is sighted being driven towards the rocks, but eventually manages to reach the quayside safely. Othello disembarks with his men; he proclaims a victory over the Turks and then proceeds to the castle.

His ensign Iago approaches the young Venetian gentleman Roderigo, who is besotted with Othello's wife, Desdemona. Roderigo is disheartened but Iago assures him that Desdemona will soon tire of her new husband. Iago reveals that his apparent