

2012-2013

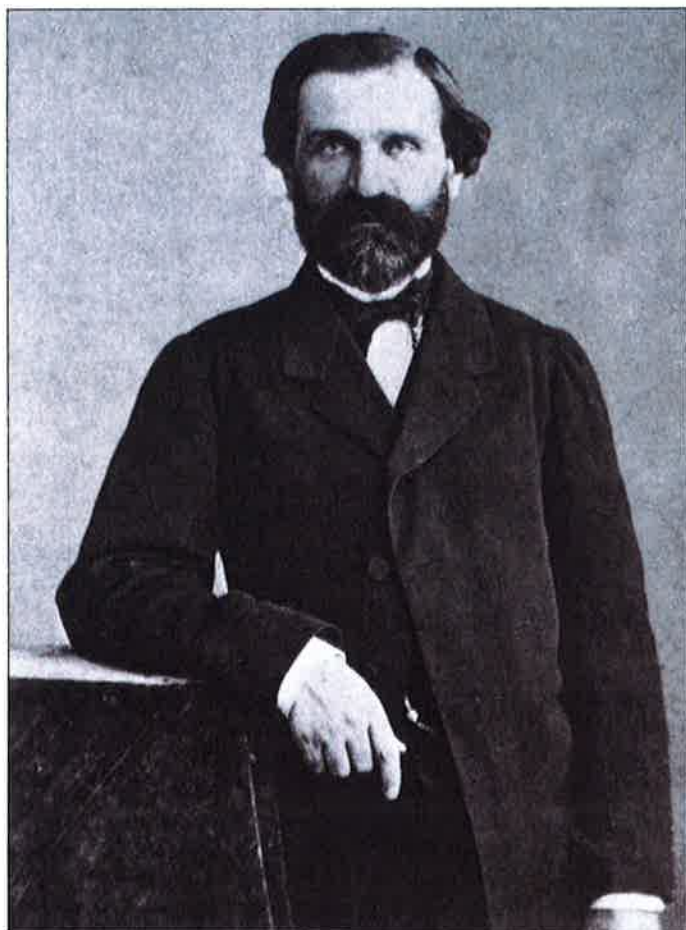
Simon Boccanegra

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Late Bloomer: The Trials and Triumph of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*

By Roger Pines

MUSEO TEATRALE ALLA SCALA



Giuseppe Verdi in the 1850s

The music and drama of *Simon Boccanegra* are magnificent from start to finish, and yet it was many decades before the operagoing public recognized it as a genuine masterpiece of the Italian repertoire. Even if there were problems with the original version (which failed dismally at its 1857 premiere), so profoundly moving is Boccanegra himself that one would have thought this character's appeal would have ensured audiences' devotion. We're fortunate that Verdi cared enough about this opera to return to it 24 years later and make significant changes. Granted, the successful 1881 revision has yet to acquire the universal popularity accorded *La traviata*, *Il trovatore*, and *Rigoletto*. But certainly in the past three or four decades, with many outstanding productions of *Simon Boccanegra* performed by important interpreters in major international houses, it's been repeatedly proven that the piece offers endless rewards to any sensitive, probing listener.

This wasn't an opera Verdi absolutely needed to write – at least, not for any financial reason. By the mid-1850s the composer, having entered his forties, was already comfortable; ensconced at his home base

(a farm at Sant' Agata in Italy's Emilia-Romagna region), he was long past his self-described "galley years" of honing his craft and establishing his reputation. At this point he was happy producing new operas only when a dramatic source attracted him or the offer from a particular performance venue proved irresistible.

It happened that in 1856, when Verdi returned to Venice's Teatro La Fenice to conduct a *Traviata* revival, he accepted a commission from the theater's management for a new opera. Searching for a subject led him to a play by Antonio García Gutiérrez, whose niche as a leader in Spanish Romantic literature had been confirmed by his play of 1836, *El trovador*. Given the success Verdi had enjoyed in fashioning that story into *Il trovatore*, it was hardly surprising that he hoped lightning would strike a second time. The play *Simón Boccanegra* (1843) had been a triumph for Gutiérrez, who had based it on Genoa's first Doge. Boccanegra governed the city from 1339 until his enemies poisoned him in 1363.

Real-life historical figures frequently appealed to Verdi. Already by this time he'd brought to the operatic stage (albeit with a great deal of dramatic license) Nebuchadnezzar, Macbeth, Joan of Arc, and Doge Francesco Foscari of Venice. Almost from the beginning his operas had brilliantly depicted the private lives of public personalities. He was also a politically astute person (17 years after *Boccanegra*'s premiere, he would be named a senator by King Victor Emanuel II), and the political strife within Boccanegra's Genoa would have attracted him as fodder for dramatic presentation.



DAVID H. FISHMAN

Tito Gobbi portrayed *Simon Boccanegra* at Lyric Opera in 1959, 1960, and 1965 (pictured here).

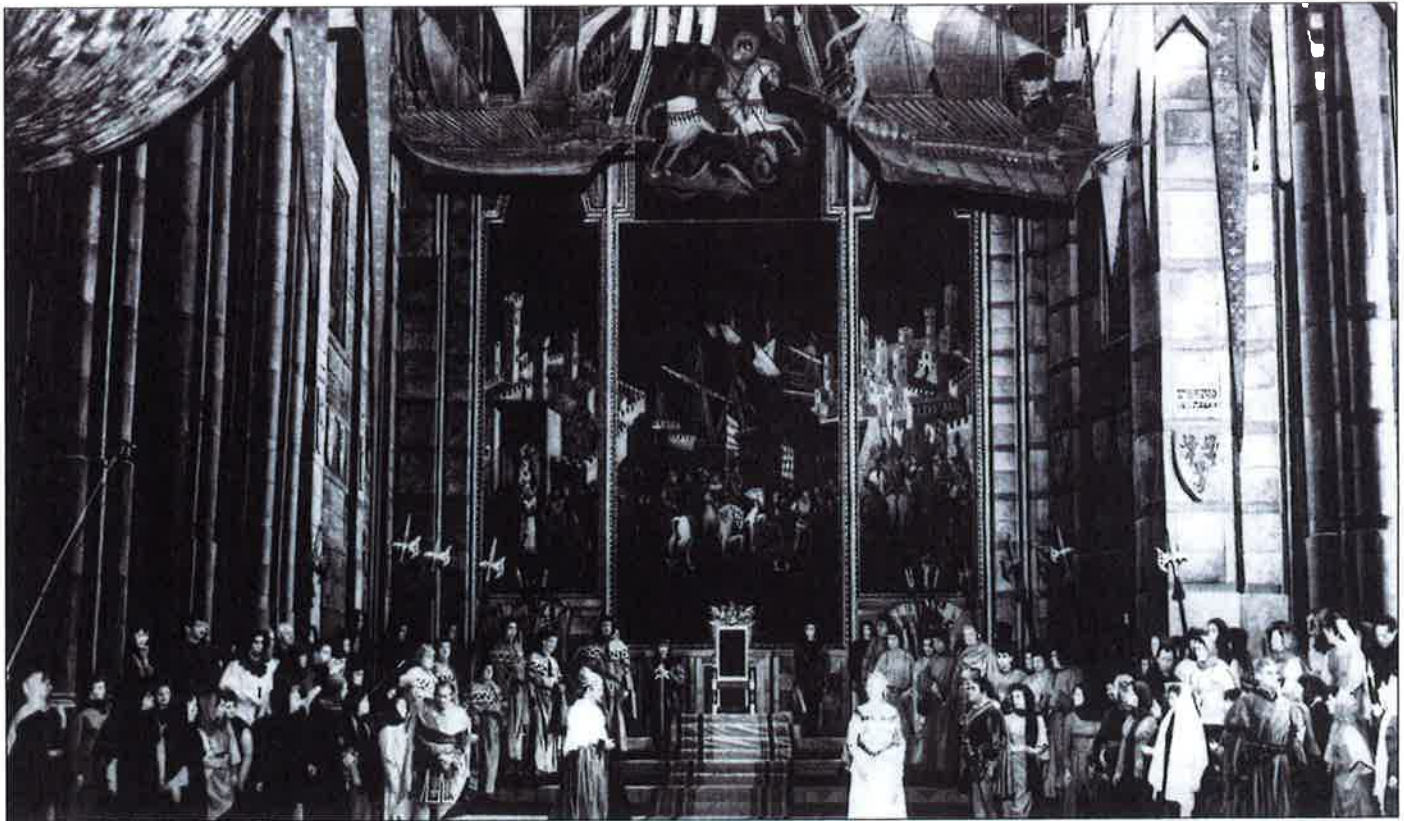
Beyond all that, however, Gutiérrez's play would have attracted him not just because of its actual events, but because of the father-daughter relationship that plays such a central role in this opera. Boccanegra loses his daughter, only to be joyfully reunited with her 25 years later. Verdi was himself a parent who knew about losing a child (his own two children did not survive infancy). He invariably approached any parent-child relationship in his operas with unique sensitivity. Verdi had also lost his first wife when she was only 26, after just four years of marriage; he would have understood from experience the shock of the young Boccanegra when he discovers that his beloved Maria has died.

Unlike many of his ilk, Verdi was in every case exceptionally specific in what he required of any librettist. With *Boccanegra* he created a prose scenario that he sent to Francesco Maria Piave, who had already given him libretti for seven operas (most recently *La traviata*). In one of his many letters to Piave, the composer informed him that he desired prose rather than poetry for this text, a mark of originality and a major departure from his previous practice. Verdi managed to finish *Boccanegra* in a few months, and expectations were high at the Fenice, where the work was first heard on March 1, 1857. That woefully unsuccessful performance prompted Verdi's comment in a letter to an official of the opera house in Naples – it's become one of most frequently quoted passages in the composer's extensive correspondence: "I had a fiasco in Venice almost as great as that of *La traviata*. I thought I'd done something passable, but it seems I was mistaken." *Boccanegra*'s original version was performed on occasion during the next decade, but seldom thereafter. Clearly it in no way captured the operagoing public's imagination as the greatest of Verdi's previous works had done. By the time he was persuaded to revise the piece, he was quite experienced in that process, having made major changes in *Macbeth*, *I Lombardi* (for a French version, retitled *Jérusalem*), and *Stiffelio* (which became *Aroldo*). A decade after *Boccanegra*'s premiere he had given the world *Don*



NANCY SORENSEN

Ferruccio Mazzoli as Fiesco at Lyric Opera, 1959.



NANCY SORENSEN

The Council Chamber scene at Lyric Opera, 1960.



TONY ROMANO



Piero Cappuccilli (center) in the title role at *Lyric Opera*, 1974.

Martina Arroyo (Amelia) and Carlo Cossutta (Gabriele) at *Lyric Opera*, 1974.

Carlos, which would be subjected to major reworking during its complicated early history. To no other opera of Verdi, however, did the composer address so much rethinking as *Simon Boccanegra* – and no other Verdi work was so substantially improved as a result.

The revision was a collaborative effort between Verdi and Arrigo Boito, who was responsible for reworking the text. An opera composer in his own right (*Mefistofele*, *Nerone*), Boito would eventually continue their superb partnership by serving as librettist for *Otello* and *Falstaff*. The success of the revision's premiere at Milan's La Scala (March 24, 1881) had nearly as much to do with Boito's contribution as Verdi's. It was also due in part to two gifted singers in their early thirties, both destined for international fame – Italian heroic tenor Francesco Tamagno (Adorno) and French baritone Victor Maurel (Boccanegra). Their triumphs singing these formidable roles led to Verdi offering them the opportunity of a lifetime: the world premiere of *Otello* six years later, in which Tamagno sang the title role with Maurel as Iago.



TONY ROMANO

In the revised *Boccanegra*, La Scala audiences heard a work that musically presented an intriguing mix of old and new. The differences between the two versions are obvious, beginning with the very first notes: the original starts with a series of massive chords, as if anticipating a grand, enormously public scene, before proceeding into two important themes heard later in the opera. In contrast, the revision begins with a very brief, dignified, brooding introduction, leading seamlessly into the hushed, tense Paolo/Pietro dialogue that begins the prologue.

Similar changes occur throughout the second version, with dramatic and musical compactness as Verdi's and Boito's *modus operandi*. Nowhere is this more evident than in the astonishing Council Chamber scene, which truly shows the difference between middle-period and late Verdi. The composer jettisoned from his original version the hugely exuberant chorus, the dancing, the conventionally structured sextet, and the final rousing large-scale ensemble that had harkened back to much earlier operas (*Macbeth* and *Ernani*). Placing the action in the Council Chamber rather than the city square already eliminates the need for any ceremonial moment that would distract from the drama at hand. The scene is now tightly structured, with not a wasted word or note anywhere.

Had Verdi written the Doge's plea to



TONY ROMANO



Sherrill Milnes in the title role, with Carlo Cossutta as Gabriele (top photo, kneeling) and Ellen Shade as Amelia (below), *Lyric Opera*, 1979.

TONY ROMANO



the plebeians and patricians in, say, the late 1840s, it would have led into a grand-scale ensemble with principals and chorus, with a barnstorming concluding section giving full play to the principals' vocal prowess. By 1881, however, that showy approach no longer interested Verdi. Boccanegra's solo – as close as the role gets to an aria – lasts barely two-and-a-half minutes, and the ensemble that follows isn't that long either. Listen also to the last moments of the scene: in Verdi's music you'll hear an almost unbearable tension in Boccanegra's words, and just as striking are the final bars – the crowd disperses as they *whisper* "Sia maledetto!" ("May he be cursed!"). That is followed by the contrast of Paolo's one-word exclamation "Orror!" accompanied by a veritable barrage of orchestral power.

Other musical highlights are equally memorable. Besides the opera's best-known episode – Fiesco's painfully moving entrance aria – there are two splendid duets for Amelia and Gabriel, each rather more intimate and not nearly as lengthy as in the more famous duets for the lovers in *Ballo* and *Aida*. The Act Two trio is arguably the most magnificent of the several soprano/tenor/baritone trios in the Verdi canon.

DAN REST



Simon Boccanegra at Lyric Opera, 1995-96: Before her lover Gabriele (Michael Sylvester, far left), her father the Doge (Alexandru Agache, center) and the villainous Paolo (Richard Cowan, seated right), Amelia (Dame Kiri Te Kanawa) recalls her abduction.

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By 1881 Verdi had developed miraculously as a musical psychologist, while retaining his matchless gift for profoundly expressive lyricism. In both respects, the greatest feature of the revised *Boccanegra* is the glorious duet for Amelia and the Doge. Its cumulative impact equals that of two of Verdi's greatest scenes in other operas, the confrontations of Violetta and Germont (*La traviata*) and Aida and Amonasro (*Aida*). The audience's sympathy is drawn to both Amelia and Boccanegra from their first tentative moments together. We can feel them growing more comfortable in each other's presence once Amelia tells the Doge what she knows of her early years. Here Verdi creates surpassingly lovely phrases for both characters, blending them with exquisite smoothness. There is a transitional section with Boccanegra's return to tentativeness, his vocal line making clear that he can barely speak, so overwhelmed is he by the mere *possibility* that this may be his long-lost daughter. Above all, there is the profoundly affecting finale of the duet – Amelia's exit on a long-held high B-flat ("Padre!"), with Boccanegra's soft sustaining of the word "figlia" (daughter) as he gazes ecstatically after her.

Nothing in Verdi is more deeply felt or more lyrically satisfying than that soprano baritone duet – proof of the enormous distance Verdi had traveled from the first version of *Simon Boccanegra* to the revision. The work the 1881 audience heard drew on everything this master composer had achieved artistically, while bringing forth the extraordinary humanity that made him unique.

Roger Pines, Lyric Opera's dramaturg, writes frequently for major opera publications and recording companies internationally.

Ferruccio Furlanetto (left) as Fiesco and Thomas Hampson (right) in the title role, Act Three, Metropolitan Opera, 2007.