

## Giuseppe Verdi

### Reading and Discussion

**Giuseppe Verdi** was an Italian composer who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He is known mainly for the operas that he composed. He was influenced by the Italian composers **Gioachino Rossini** and **Vincenzo Bellini**. The great German composer, Richard Wagner, had little influence on Verdi, even though they were contemporaries.

The majority of Verdi's works were **operas**. Operas are works that involve an orchestra, a singing element, and an acting element. The operas during Verdi's time were called **Grand Operas** because they were lavish, broad compositions that had four or five acts. An **act** is a segment of a performance. The operas that Verdi composed were typical of the time period in Italy. They were written in Italian, and the plots, speech, and music were focused on expressing the emotions of the storyline. The operas that Verdi composed emphasized imagination. The energy and the drive of his music were melodramatic and potent. He preferred to compose operas based on the ideas of patriotism and national pride. This helped stir his audiences' understanding and emotion about the performance.

One of Verdi's first operas was "Nabucco," which in English is Nebuchadnezzar. "Nabucco" is based on a biblical story involving the Hebrew people that were exiled from their homeland by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Its first performance was in March of 1842 in Milan, Italy. The famous song from the opera is "**Va, pensiero**," or, "The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves." The opera was a great success and established Verdi as a qualified and respected composer. The Metropolitan Opera Association first presented it in 1960, and it has remained on their roster ever since. The key female role in the opera is the character **Abigaille**, the daughter of King Nabucco. It is a soprano part, which means that it carries the melody and is the highest vocal range. In "Nabucco," the first singer to have this role was **Giuseppina Strepponi**. It has been seen as one of the more difficult soprano parts to sing.

The nineteenth opera that Verdi composed was "La traviata." This opera was based on a novel, "The Lady of the Camellias," which was written by a Frenchman. It is a three act opera that has become one of the most popular operas in the world. As such, it is the third most popular opera performed in North America. The story of "La traviata" takes place in Paris. It tells the story of a woman named **Violetta** who falls in love with a man named **Alfredo**. They fall in love together, which upsets a baron who is fond of Violetta. The baron and Alfredo duel. Sadly, Violetta has tuberculosis and dies at the end of the opera in the arms of Alfredo. The 2001 movie Moulin Rouge! is based on this story and opera.

In 1870, Verdi was commissioned by **Ismail Pasha**, who was a prince of Egypt, to write an opera. Verdi wrote an opera named "Aida" using the works of Antonio Ghislanzoni and Auguste Mariette as its basis. "Aida" was first performed in Cairo

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in December of 1871. It is the sixteenth most-performed opera in North America. "Aida," which takes place in Ancient Egypt, tells the story of a Ethiopian princess who is captured and brought back to Egypt. A general named **Radames** falls in love with her, an act which defies the Pharaoh, who owns the girl. This four act opera was immediately a success. Afterwards, Verdi did not write another opera until 1887, which was sixteen years later.

Verdi was known for several key concepts that he integrated into his operas. One of these was his skill in **counterpoint**. Counterpoint occurs in music when two or more lines sound different from each other, but, when heard together, are quite harmonious. Another characteristic of his compositions is his strong unity with the **libretto**. The libretto is the text or verse of the opera. Verdi worked closely with the libretto writers of his time and spent great effort on emphasizing the emotion in the librettos. This is one reason why Verdi's operas are intense and very passionate. During Verdi's time, the concept of *bel canto* was used frequently. This referred to "beautiful singing." Verdi strove to balance the emotional, beautiful singing in his operas with the music that would best compliment it.

Before Verdi died in 1901, he founded a home in Milan for retired musicians called the **Casa di Riposo per Musicisti**. Verdi and the singer **Giuseppina Strepponi** are among the musicians buried there.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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## Activities

### Activity A: Fill In the Blanks.

1. Verdi was influenced by the Italian composers \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The great German composer, \_\_\_\_\_, had little influence on Verdi - even though they were contemporaries.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ are works that involve an orchestra, a singing element, and an acting element.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ occurs in music when two (or more) lines sound different from each other, but, when heard together, are quite harmonious.
5. Before Verdi died in 1901, he founded a home in \_\_\_\_\_ for retired musicians called the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti.
6. "One of Verdi's first operas was " \_\_\_\_\_," which in English is Nebuchadnezzar.
7. The operas during Verdi's time were called \_\_\_\_\_ because they were lavish, broad compositions that had four or five acts.

### Activity B: True or False.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Verdi preferred to compose operas based on the ideas of patriotism and national pride.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The operas that Verdi composed were not typical of the time period in Italy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The key female role in "Nabucco" is the character Violetta, the daughter of King Nabucco.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. In 1870, Verdi was commissioned by Ismail Pasha, who was a prince of Egypt, to write an opera.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The libretto is the text or verse of the opera.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The nineteenth opera that Verdi composed was "La traviata." This opera was based on a novel, "The Lady of the Camellias."
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. The 2001 movie Moulin Rouge! was based on "Aida."

## Answer Key

### Activity A

1. Verdi was influenced by the Italian composers Rossini and Bellini.
2. The great German composer, Richard Wagner, had little influence on Verdi, even though they were contemporaries.
3. Operas are works that involve an orchestra, a singing element, and an acting element.
4. Counterpoint occurs in music when two (or more) lines sound different from each other, but, when heard together, are quite harmonious.
5. Before Verdi died in 1901, he founded a home in Milan for retired musicians called the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti.
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### Activity B

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