

Program Note

In 1859, writing to his longtime collaborator librettist Francesco Maria Piave from his estate in the provincial village of Sant'Agata, Giuseppe Verdi insisted, "I am now the complete countryman. I hope I have bidden farewell to the muses and that I shall never again feel the temptation to take up my pen." At the time of this letter, the 45-year-old Verdi was exhausted following his "galley years," a period of intense productivity that saw him compose 19 operas in less than 17 years and become a national icon. Fortunately, it turned out that the maestro wasn't quite ready for an early retirement, which would have deprived posterity of the great masterpieces to come in his later years. Now a wealthy landowner, though, Verdi no longer needed to chase commission after commission and could instead compose at his leisure. So, when the Imperial Theatre of St. Petersburg approached him two years later to write a new opera on any subject of his choosing, he seized the opportunity to create his most ambitious—and bewildering—work to date.

Verdi initially settled upon Hugo's *Ruy Blas* as a source, but the Russian censors rejected the play for its depiction of a lowly valet becoming the queen's lover. When Verdi threatened to back out of the agreement, they relented, only for the composer to then lose interest. "Verdi scratched his head, pointing out that for *Ruy Blas* there was such and such a difficulty; that in the other dramas he had skimmed through there was some other; that a certain play he had once read and liked could not be found," Verdi's wife Giuseppina Strepponi recounted to theater agent Mauro Corticelli. "There we were hunting round the bookshops and secondhand dealers of Turin, leaving no corner unexplored. Nothing! Nowhere to be found!" The work in question was *Don Álvaro o la Fuerza del Sino* by Ángel de Saavedra, Duke of Rivas, and as Giuseppina was glad to report, "In the end ... [Verdi] seized by the scruff of the neck a certain person who was going to Milan, the only place it would be possible to find the play and from which he did in fact get it after 24 hours."

Saavedra's play, Verdi told his French publisher, Léon Escudier, was "powerful, singular, and truly vast ... certainly something quite out of the ordinary." In this sweeping five-act drama, the half-Spanish, half-Incan title character unintentionally kills his lover's father, only to be pursued by her vengeful brothers and ultimately take their lives—and his own—before the final curtain falls. In translating the melodramatic material to the operatic stage, Verdi and Piave tightened the action and condensed the two brothers into the single Don Carlo di Vargas. The composer hounded his librettist with demands for concision: "For God's sake, my dear Piave, let's think about this carefully. ... The poetry can and must say all that the prose says, and in half the words. So far, you're not doing that." At the same time, he wanted to retain Saavedra's colorful secondary characters, whose quotidian lives provided a stark contrast to the aristocrats' life-or-death struggles. To this end, Verdi and Piave even incorporated an unrelated scene from Schiller's depiction of military life during the Thirty Years War, *Wallensteins Lager*. As eminent Verdi scholar Julian Budden explains,

the opera became a kind of stylistic synthesis of the composer's three most important literary idols: "Hugo is present in the dramatic conception; Schiller is drawn upon directly for one of the encampment scenes; while in the portrayal of humanity on a vast canvas ranging from the highest to the lowest in the land, there is the unmistakable sense of a Shakespearean chronicle play."

Verdi and Giuseppina set out for Russia in December 1861—bringing along copious quantities of wine, pasta, cheese, and salami, not to mention furs—only for the premiere to be postponed due to the prima donna's ill health. When *Forza* finally did take the stage in November 1862, it was generally praised, with the *Journal de St.-Pétersbourg* lauding it "of all Verdi's works ... the most complete both in terms of its inspiration and the rich abundance of its melodic invention" and reporting that the cast "had on several occasions to drag the celebrated composer onto the stage, to the sound of wild cheering and prolonged applause." But as the opera continued its Grand Tour through Europe, it was received less favorably. Audiences were especially horrified by the gruesome final scene, which saw Alvaro dispatch his foe on stage, only for Carlo to stab Leonora with his dying breath. Confronted by the lifeless bodies of both his lover and her brother, Alvaro hurled himself forthwith off a cliff, blasphemously cursing mankind. Reviewing the opera's premiere in Rome, *Il Sistro* bemoaned that, "there would have been more applause had the public not been so displeased by the sight of so many dead on stage—a true slaughter"; in Trieste, the *Gazzetta dei Teatri* decried the libretto as "a real monstrosity."

The criticism weighed on Verdi, who, as early as October 1863, exhorted Piave that "something must be done to *Forza del Destino*; but first of all one must think of the ending and find a way to avoid so many dead bodies." But at a loss for a less bloody resolution and distracted by other projects, most notably *Don Carlos* for Paris, the composer dithered, and a revised version wouldn't reach the stage of Milan's Teatro alla Scala until February 1869—a delay that was further exacerbated when Piave suffered a debilitating stroke in 1867. In the intervening years, Verdi fielded a number of suggested fixes for the "infernale scioglimento" ("infernal dénouement"), with the most incongruous coming from Achille de Lauzières, *Don Carlos's* Italian translator. In Lauzières's proposed ending, a bolt of lightning set Leonora's hermitage ablaze just as Alvaro was to deal his fatal blow. This stroke of divine intervention so shocked Carlo that he ceded to blessing the lovers' union, proclaiming "Lottammo invano; ha vinto la forza del destin!" ("We fought in vain; the force of destiny has won!"). Unsurprisingly, Verdi dismissed this scenario out of hand, explaining, "the 'power of fate,' 'the fatality,' cannot lead to a reconciliation of the two families; the brother, after having made all that fuss, must avenge his father's death (remember, too, that he's a Spaniard)."

Ultimately, it was Antonio Ghislanzoni, *Aida's* librettist-to-be, who supplied an acceptable conclusion for the drama, moving Carlo's death and his sister's stabbing off stage and having Padre Guardiano and the dying Leonora urge

Alvaro to find consolation in prayer rather than suicide. Verdi reworked not only the finale but made small enhancements throughout the score—tinkering with keys and orchestration, extending some of the ensembles, slightly adjusting vocal lines—and significantly reordered the scenes of Act III. Originally, the Schiller-derived encampment scene separated Alvaro and Carlo's duets, and the act ended with the first of two duels between the rivals, followed by a rather unremarkable aria and cabaletta for the tenor. In revising the score, Verdi and Ghislanzoni repositioned the duets back-to-back (separated by a brief choral interlude), inserted a patrol of soldiers to preempt the duel, and excised Alvaro's scena entirely, instead giving him a brief recitative in which he resolves to seek the peace of a monastery. The act then closed with the encampment scene. (Following longstanding Met tradition, this season's performances restore Verdi's original order, with the encampment scene once again falling between the duets, though Alvaro's act-ending declamation comes from the 1869 version.) Verdi also expanded the original prelude into *Forza's* now-famous overture, which immediately grabs the listener with its insistent opening chords from the brass and bassoons. From there, the strings trace a seething, circular theme that snakes its way around a series of melodies associated with Alvaro, Leonora, and Guardiano—and like a Wagnerian leitmotif, this musical embodiment of destiny pervades the score, incessantly pursuing the heroine as she attempts in vain to escape her fate.

In his seminal analysis of Verdi's canon, Budden remarks, "The most bewildering aspect of Verdi's genius remains that unending capacity to take in fresh experience and in each successive work present something new yet deeply rooted in the past ... like a world seen through an ever-stronger lens." This assessment is particularly true of *La Forza del Destino*, in which one hears clear echoes of Verdi's bel canto roots alongside vivid glimpses of the larger-scale masterworks still to come. While the composer supplies stunning arias for his principal trio—including three for the leading lady—the true dramatic heavy lifting is left to the duets, which reject rigid formal structures and rather take their cues from the natural contours of the story. And Verdi never loses sight of the supporting characters—a cast of peasants, soldiers, friars, muleteers, friars, servants, pilgrims, and vivandières whose scenes find him at his most experimental. Preziosilla's "Al suon del tamburo" is a not-so-distant relative of Marie's regimental song "Chacun le sait" in Donizetti's *La Fille di Régiment*, while Fra Melitone's ranting and ravings both pay homage to the basso buffos of Rossini and pave the way for the fluid, conversational comedy of *Falstaff*. Likewise, the final scene of Act II, in which the friars call down a curse on anyone who would violate the sacred hermitage, harkens back to the rousing men's choruses of *Ernani* and *Il Trovatore* but also anticipates the priests of *Aida* and some of the most thunderous passages in the Requiem.

More than any of Verdi's works, *La Forza del Destino* is defined by its extreme, often sudden, contrasts. In the first scene of Act II, a group of passing pilgrims

brings the frenzy of the inn to a standstill—though only momentarily—whereas in the final act, the convincingly woebegone chorus of starving peasants abruptly devolves into broad comedy upon Melitone’s entrance. Perhaps the most striking instance of musical whiplash is the Act III encampment scene: A triumphant chorus reveling in the joys of war gives way to Preziosilla and her chirpy fortune telling, followed in rapid succession by a round of toasts, Trabuco’s bleating arioso, the cries of beggars (comprising just 13 bars of music!) and young recruits (again, only 13 bars), the sweet-talking of the vivandières, a gay tarantella, and Melitone’s haranguing, pun-filled sermon. The scene finally culminates in one of Verdi’s most unusual creations, the “Rataplan” chorus, as Preziosilla leads the entire assembly in an onomatopoetic imitation of the sounds of battle, sparsely accompanied by side drum and pizzicato strings.

The peculiarities of *Forza*’s plot and the sheer musical variety of its score have often overwhelmed audiences (and opera companies, who have felt it necessary to endlessly chop up and rearrange the scenes). As Verdi biographer Francis Toye wryly reflected, “If *La Forza del Destino* inspires love at all, it is perhaps the instinctive tenderness and worship given by a lover to his mistress rather than the reasoned affections of friend for friend or husband for wife.” Yet the passions kindled by a top-notch performance are indeed palpable—something Verdi understood when he commented, “It is certain that in *La Forza del Destino* the singers do not necessarily have to know how to manage solfeggio [technical singing exercises], but they must have soul and understand the words and express their meaning.” Consider just one illustrative example: Leonora’s “Madre, pietosa vergine,” which opens Act II, Scene 2. First singing in halting phrases as she pleads to the Madonna, Leonora’s voice soon takes flight on one of Verdi’s trademark long rising lines, a breathtaking effect made that much more powerful when the melody is repeated “con più forza” and buoyed by offstage chorus and full orchestra. It is just one of a number of moments in *Forza* when an artist, who has soul and understands the words and their meaning, can seem to halt destiny in its tracks—if only for an instant.

—Christopher Browner

Christopher Browner is the Met’s Senior Editor.