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A Semiotic Analysis of Giuseppe Verdi's Operas

Abstract

In this study, I examine the works of Giuseppe Verdi, the 19th-century genius of Italian opera, to explore how a particular concept and attitude towards life manifests itself in the diverse yet fundamentally similar life situations of the opera characters. I seek to answer how all this is reflected in the text and the music, and whether an interaction arises between them: do they presuppose and complement one another, and can the recurring, conscious/unconscious logic of meaning-making, signified and signifier, be demonstrated throughout the body of work? In my study, drawing on the tools of linguistics and semiotics, I seek to demonstrate that music and words are phenomena that presuppose and influence one another, capable of revealing the interconnections of meaning.

Keywords: music and word, dramatisation, Giuseppe Verdi, tension–reduction, symbol

**“Prima le parole, dopo la musica!
– Prima la musica, dopo le parole!”¹**

These two statements are heard at the beginning of Richard Strauss's opera *Capriccio*. In the 20th-century German composer's final vocal work, at the end of a significant (stage) oeuvre, he does not shy away from posing the key question

1 “First the words, then the music! – First the music, then the words!”

of vocal music even to himself. Which came first: the chicken or the egg? Does the music seek out the text that suits it, or are the specific contours of the music already inherent in the language, which the composer then casts into sound?

In my short study, I examine this question from a particular angle, acting as an observer within the oeuvre of the 19th-century genius of Italian opera. How does a concept and an attitude to life manifest itself in the different yet essentially identical life situations of the opera characters? How is this reflected in the text and the music, and whether an interaction between the two possible. Do they presuppose or complement one another? And furthermore: can the recurring, conscious/unconscious logic of meaning-making, of signified and signifier, be discerned throughout Verdi's entire oeuvre?

In this essay, I cannot go into detail regarding the history of vocal music, but I must certainly mention the birth of opera, the queen of genres, and the distinctive nature of the Italian musical tradition within it.

The birth of opera

Italy's musical culture, in the modern sense and rooted in Christianity, is almost as old as the institution of the Roman Papacy. European sacred music, which blossomed from Gregorian chant, owes the most to the Italian Renaissance, alongside the masters of the Low Countries. Until the Reformation, which spread predominantly in German-speaking regions, Rome was considered the centre of the Christian musical world, and in the Catholic sense, it remained so. And although, with the spread of Protestantism and through the work of Schütz, Telemann, Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach, cities such as Leipzig, Weimar, Hamburg, and London entered the public consciousness of sacred music, the composers of Western music history were never able to free themselves from the influence of Italy. By this I do not primarily mean admiration, reverence, or enthusiasm for cultural, historical, sacred, or even natural values, but rather the Italian tradition itself, which is founded on the magic of the singing voice and the philosophy of *sempre cantare* (always singing). In *Der Rosenkavalier* by Richard Strauss, an Italian singer appears in a cameo role (a part for which opera houses usually cast a *bel canto* star), we cannot understand Mozart's music without the Italian operatic style, rather than the opera genre itself, and Liszt, by his own admission, hired singers for his piano lessons to convey the musicality of the phrases he was teaching. It is no wonder that in this part of Europe the idea arose that, following/

alongside sacred music, the structure of secular music too should be determined by the primacy of the voice. “Instruments too imitate the singing voice, and the theatre should not merely work with musical interludes but should sing itself” (Orselli and Rescigno 1986, 64). Thus, through the patronage established by representatives of the aristocracy, the urban bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia, the genre of opera, “the intermediate vocal art”, came into being, which starting from the loftiness of speech behind the masks sought to express the emotional and intellectual content of the text to the fullest through the singing voice. At this juncture, in the battle between music and text, the text prevailed, disregarding the polyphonic traditions of the time (Harnoncourt 2002, 34).

The first giant of opera history, Claudio Monteverdi, also got retribution for this, as by perfecting the monodic style and, through *liberamente* singing, he paved the way for the purely vocal representation of the text’s dramatic aspects (cf. *Örök muzsika*, 1977, 112–125), establishing the roles of the two fundamental structural elements that would later emerge: the *recitative* and the aria, and relegating the instruments to the role of accompaniment to the vocal part, introducing the device of harmonisation: the *basso continuo* (Harnoncourt 2002, 220–221).

With this step—in contrast to German instrumentalism—Italian music irrevocably committed itself to the primacy of the voice in composition, which over the centuries gave rise to generations of musicians such as the Vivaldi, the Scarlattis, the Gabrielis and even the Puccini family, and gave rise to epoch-defining composers with unique voices such as Rossini, Verdi and Ottorino Respighi. However, the one-sidedness of the Italian style, its apparent inability to renew itself, and the exclusive dominance of the opera genre have been the subject of much criticism over the centuries. Johann Sebastian Bach never ventured into the opera genre, although he surpassed the opera composers of his time in terms of dramatic music and wrote of the opera performances in Dresden—strictly only in family correspondence (Wolff 2004, 416)—as charming little songs. Christoph Willibald Gluck undertook a reformist endeavour to ensure that musical stage drama could remain viable in the wake of Italian deviations, restoring the primacy of text and dramatic events over the self-serving style of vocal coloratura.

And let us admit that, ultimately, it was the Salzburg genius, the comet that was Mozart—who dazzled everyone who laid eyes on him—who was able to lead the corrupted genre out of the labyrinth of self-repetition and affectation, and to rescue the queen of genres for the 19th century, among others, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così*, and, as a peculiar synthesis of *opera seria* and *buffa*, *Don Giovanni*.

Carlo Goldoni accomplished a similar feat in the realm of Italian comedy. His realism, which rejected false pathos and featured flesh-and-blood characters, is akin to the infusion of vitality Mozart brought to the musical stage.

It is a well-known fact that Richard Wagner held Rossini in high esteem, although he did not agree with him on artistic matters (Toye 1981, 168–172), and he did not think much of the music of the Italians, including Verdi. Arrigo Boito and his team were precisely of the late Verdi style: before the premiere of *Otello*, he pronounced a death sentence on Italian music, emphasising his desire to promote German music and to revive Italian instrumental music, for which the Milan String Quartet Society was founded (see Budden 2007).

Alongside critical voices, the Italians' rise to prominence was sometimes met with almost envious admiration. Vienna in the age of Beethoven and Schubert was in the grip of Rossini fever, which, according to Nikolaus Harnoncourt, left its mark on the score of Schubert's *Sixth Symphony*. Schubert wrote about the Italian composer's operas on several occasions in his letters (see *Franz Schubert's Letters*, 1978, 36–37). Unlike Wagner, Verdi was aware of the merits of his German contemporary. He regarded *Tristan und Isolde* as one of the greatest achievements of the human spirit. In their musical-dramatic aspirations (through-composition as a dramatic aim), we can discern similarities, but their aesthetics differed radically, and Verdi valued Italian flexibility over German rhetoric.

Despite all these criticisms, whether justified or not, the Italian musical tradition, keeping the motto of *bel canto* ('beautiful singing') in mind, has preserved its uniquely flexible, emotionally rich character and system of gestures over the centuries, whether in vocal or instrumental works.

Italian literature of the late Baroque, early Classical and Enlightenment periods was of decisive importance for the development of the opera genre. When writing an opera, the selection of the drama to be set to music—the plot (be it Greek tragedies, Shakespeare, or later Schiller's works)—is merely the first step for the composer. Adapting a given play into an opera libretto requires a skilled, masterful hand, which has not always been available in the history of the genre. The emergence of the libretto was preceded by the genre of melodrama, which, in the spirit of idyllic composition, was born from the Italian *Settecento's*² concept of (Arcadia).³

² The Italian name for the art of the 1700s.

³ An Italian literary society founded in 1689. Its main objective was to counterbalance the florid Baroque style of writing.

The figure who defined this era, in terms of song-based works, was Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), who, through patronage, rose to become court poet in Vienna and the uncrowned king of opera librettos. As Imre Madarász aptly put it, Metastasio's popularity was because his melodramas were dominated by musicality, or *melos* (melodic elements). It seems paradoxical that, although his works lack dramatic conflict, he is nevertheless able to express the inner emotional turmoil of the characters through the melancholy found halfway between a tragic sense of life and the idyll of pastoral drama, which is the fundamental criterion of opera librettos. It is true that in his arias, emotional intensity and authenticity were not directly proportional to one another, but he was able to exploit the musicality of the Italian language to the full in them (Madarász 1994, 200–203).

The Enlightenment (*Illuminismo*) that followed the *Settecento*, with its vision of freedom and struggle against tyranny (Alfieri),⁴ paved the way for the *Risorgimento*⁵ era that influenced the first phase of Verdi's oeuvre. The patriotism that formed the basis of the *Ottocento*⁶ and the advocacy of national liberal ideas became inextricably linked with the figures of Giuseppe Mazzini, Garibaldi and Cavour. The artists' (Romantic) sense of mission served as a breeding ground for the dissemination of the new ideology, and the publication of a new work of art was equivalent to a political act. Verdi possessed a wide-ranging knowledge of literature. Beyond the classics, his ideal was the greatest figure of Italian Romanticism: Alessandro Manzoni,⁷ whose style, rooted in Romanticism yet pointing towards Realism (sublimity in reality), his genre scenes, and his unparalleled characterisation of his protagonists were qualities that Verdi could partly claim as his own. With the harshness of his verse, devoid of the melodiousness of the Italian language, Manzoni also broke with the *Melos* tradition of Metastasio. Verdi dedicated his Requiem, premiered in 1874,⁸ to the memory of Manzoni, who by then had become a legend, a symbol of an era, just as Mór Jókai was in Hungary, following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867.

4 Vittorio Alfieri (1749–1803), Italian playwright, poet, and writer. One of the most significant figures in Italian tragedy.

5 In English: 'uprising', 'resurrection', 'reorganisation'. The name of the 19th-century Italian unification movement.

6 The name given to Italian literature of the 1800s.

7 Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) was one of the greatest figures in Italian literature, a Romantic writer, poet and playwright.

8 Giuseppe Verdi: *Messa da Requiem*. Premiere: 22 May 1874, Milan, San Marco.

Having outlined various aspects of opera history, we can see that from the very beginning, stage music sought to convey the emotional and intellectual content inherent in the text, whilst the modality of the sentences formed from the words reflected the musicality of literary language. The librettist's task, much like that of the dramaturg, was to create the necessary dramatic content and the sequence of scenes serving the dramatic arc, adapting to the structure of the operatic genre: breaking the scenes down into arias, ensembles, and finales, and of course inserting recitative sections where necessary. The greatest composers—including Verdi—were never content with formulae, and always expected the most appropriate structural element to arise from the given dramatic situation, and for the form to emerge from this. In this regard, we can mention quite a few names among Verdi's allies and collaborators, from Arrigo Boito through Francesco Maria Piave to Antonio Ghislanzoni. The composer's increasingly conscious, uncompromising, rigorous, and consistent approach, focused on the drama, posed a major challenge for the librettists. The composer's stance, and the interplay between words and music, is faithfully reflected in the lines he wrote to Varesi, who played the title role in *Macbeth*:⁹ "Study the dramatic situation and the text thoroughly. The music will follow naturally" (Verdi 2011, 20).

This dramaturgical doctrine has proved decisive since the birth of opera, but this was not always the case in the past. At the inception of the Gregorian style, which defined the first centuries of Europe after Christ, music played a mediating role as a scientific and sacred (metaphysical) phenomenon, glorifying and singing of the Ever Living One. This style, arising from the naturalness of the human voice, was free from ulterior motives and, in its very simplicity, expressive. It was entirely devoid of any suggestive quality.

Later periods, particularly the madrigal conceived during the Renaissance and the doctrine of the affections and figurations that spread from the early Baroque, assigned a completely new role to (not only) vocal music, and expected a new role from it. (Johann Sebastian Bach was perhaps the only one who, in his art of natural, divine atmosphere, was able to synthesise both the dramatic challenges and the lyrical poetry of the age.) Expression and dramatisation as aesthetic principles became defining concepts for centuries. The emotions behind the words, the action and the events were depicted through differences in dynamics, articulation and timbre, certain rhythmic patterns and—with the development of

9 Felice Varesi (1813–1889) was an Italian baritone. He was an outstanding interpreter of several of Verdi's operas.

harmony—increasingly typical harmonic phenomena. The concepts of dramatic contrast and the resolution of tension emerged in music, giving rise to new musical forms and compositional principles. In parallel with this, antithetical thinking also became apparent in literature. Thomas Mann states in connection with his novel *The Magic Mountain* (Mann 1956, 416): “The novel has always been a symphony to me, a web of points and counterpoints, themes, in which thoughts play the same role as motifs in music.”

The ideals of *perfect* and *imperfect* sound were already present in the concepts of medieval music theory. The seeds of counterpoint, the existence of parts moving at different tempos or in opposite directions, were also present. However, from the 16th century onwards, these *terminus technici* no longer reflected an absolute and neutral ideal, but rather entities that struggle with one another, presuppose, and complement one another, and to which certain associations are or may be attached. To illustrate the process with a single example: this is how it became possible for a medieval Gregorian chant to be later paired with a secular text (*motet*), then in the Renaissance with a secular melody (*chanson-mise*), to become part of the oratorio as an aria in the Baroque and Viennese Classical periods, and to swell into a massive ensemble of operatic proportions in Verdi’s *Requiem*. The Romantic era marked both the culmination and the twilight of this dramatic way of thinking. Due to the decadence of the turn of the century, the artistic principles of the 20th century turned away from the Romantic ideal, but an explanation of this is not closely tied to my study, so I shall not go into it here, due to space constraints.

The secrets of Verdi’s oeuvre

In the remainder of this essay, I shall trace the origins of this old-yet-new system of signs through excerpts from three of Giuseppe Verdi’s operas. It is an exciting task and a challenge for me to explore, first from a grammatical perspective and then with the aid of semiotics, the toolkit of Verdi’s creative process, which holds real surprises and reveals to us the positive feedback of the creative mind. As I embark on this journey into linguistics and semiotics, I quote Kodály’s line of thought: “Language is a musical phenomenon. It has melody, rhythm, stress, timbre, and dynamics. Music is a more elevated form of language. As soon as it becomes a tool of art, its musical elements also become important” (Balázs 2021, 246). This statement forms the basis of our investigation. Our other guide is the definition by the Professor of Linguistics, Géza Balázs (ibid., 203):

"The relationship between reality (the signified) and the sign (the signifier) can be direct or indirect [...], concrete or abstract [...], and then there are signs that have become more distant from reality, detached, indirect (artificial)—these are symbols. A symbol may carry within it not only meaning but also a prior sign relationship. This is what symbol interpretation examines."

As I mentioned, one of the key figures in Verdi's literary interests was William Shakespeare. He grappled with the English Renaissance playwright's works throughout his entire artistic career. He planned to set six of them to music, of which *Macbeth*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*—based on *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—were realised. One of the questions in the history of music is what might have been had the three missing works, including *The Tempest* and an adaptation of *King Lear* for the operatic stage, come to fruition, but nothing came of them. *Macbeth* is a masterpiece from Verdi's early creative period. It was premiered in Florence in 1847, followed by a revised version in Paris in 1865. The libretto was written by Francesco Maria Piave. More precisely, he attempted to write it, as he was unable to meet the composer's expectations. Before the premiere, his name was even removed from the title page, and Andrea Maffei¹⁰ rushed to Verdi's aid, rewriting and supplementing Piave's work. The following lines, addressed to Piave, once again shed light on the *ars poetica* of Verdi's stage, the intertwining and interaction of text and music, the dramatic core hidden behind the words and within the sentences, and the stage characters alike (Verdi 2011, 17):

"I suggest you keep the lines short. The shorter they are, the more effective they will be [...]. In your verses, do not forget this: there must not be a single superfluous word. Everything must say something; use refined diction, except for the chorus of witches, which must be vulgar yet bizarre."

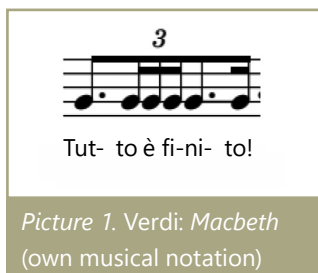
One of the most chilling scenes in the work is the few minutes of King Duncan's murder behind the scenes, accompanied by the Lady's whispers and the sighs of the English horn, and concluding with the appearance of Macbeth, who exclaims. Let us examine its key line. Macbeth returns to the stage with a murderous dagger in his hand. "*Tutto è finito!*"—he utters (in English: "It is all over!"). The composer's instruction: *con voce soffocata e lento*, meaning this phrase must be sung

¹⁰ Andrea Maffei (1798–1885), Italian poet, translator and librettist.

“in a stifled voice, slowly”. Textual indications for the performer are a constant feature in Verdi’s scores. The composer was not content with dynamic or articulation marks alone. He expected the performer to construct, sing and act out their role with the utmost care and awareness. The ideal of drama hovered before his eyes, which could only be served through this strict and consistent approach and these means. I quote again from his remarks addressed to Varesi, the lead performer in the premiere (ibid., 20):

“This is the most beautiful moment, both dramatically and musically. Pay great attention to it. Remember that it is night. Everyone is asleep, and this entire duet must be sung *sotto voce*, but with a hollow, echoing voice, to evoke terror.”

It is a rule of the Italian language that, in pronunciation, the stress generally falls on the penultimate syllable. In the conjugated form of the verb *finire* (‘to finish’, ‘to complete’) (*finito*), this rule applies, so the *ni* syllable is slightly lengthened, and in pronunciation the letter *i* is stressed [nee]. In the case of the word *tutto*, however, the vowel at the beginning of the word is pronounced slightly longer: [too-toh], whilst the *o* at the end of the word is always short. The entire phrase sounds like this when pronounced: [too-toh eh fih-nee-toh]. If we now take Kodály’s framework as our basis (see above) and seek the musicality of this sentence, its rhythm and stress patterns become clear first. We sense its paired pulsation, the metrical nature of the long and short syllables, which provides the stress. We can approximate this with a rhythmic pattern as follows:



Timbre and dynamics are a more complex matter. Based on the modality of the exclamatory sentence, it calls for strong emotional charge, speed, and liveliness, yet this does not unequivocally imply shouting, wailing or a pathetic tone, which we might spontaneously associate with it. According to Verdi’s instructions, the exact

opposite occurs in this scene, as his advice to Varesi also suggests. Macbeth staggers onto the stage almost in a trance. The *"Tutto è finito!"* is not merely a choked-off cry on his part—as if to say: "King Duncan is dead, for I have killed him"—but time stands still for a moment, the wheel of fate turns, and it is as if Macbeth were making an ominous declaration, almost to himself: the die is cast, there is no turning back from here. *"For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."*¹¹ A similar utterance is found in the case of Bánk (even if the motive for the deed falls under a quite different moral judgement): "It is over! It was—it is no more. But do not applaud, my country Hush!—the avenger trembles."¹² I have explained all this in such detail so that we may gain a better understanding of Verdi's solution, which composes this phrase in a manner that differs in part from the original grammatical axiom.



Picture 2. Verdi: *Macbeth* (score excerpt; source: Milan, Ricordi, 1976, 59)

The composer marks the elongated syllables with longer notes, minims, compared to the rest of the rhythm. The *'tu'* and *'ni'* syllables are given their musical equivalents of correct stress, with a duration proportionate to the others, in accordance with the rules of spoken language. The sung language provides an opportunity to create timbre and the associated dynamics. It is interesting that Verdi does not prescribe specific dynamic markings, but the performance instruction ('in a subdued voice') allows the singer to find the most appropriate nuance, which also encompasses dynamic quality. Here I must speak of the musical notes themselves, the melodic line, and the direction of the phrase. It is striking that Verdi asks Macbeth to recite a passage which, after three repeated Cs, soars upwards by a minor second, then bends back to the starting point. A musician raised in the classical musical tradition, which originated in the Baroque era

11 Matthew 26:52. *The Bible*. Excerpt from the *New Testament*. A statement by Jesus.

12 József Katona: *Bánk bán*. Excerpt from Act IV, Scene 7.

and has influenced music for centuries, would certainly not sing three consecutive notes in the same way, unless the composer gives explicit instructions to do so. (This is perhaps why Verdi does not write a '*crescendo*' marking in the score.) In other words, an internal energy begins to move within successive, identical notes, growing steadily until it reaches its peak and culminates. This gives rise to the visceral gesture of the bursting minor second (tension) and the release (resolution). This is alluded to in Géza Révész's analogy regarding the intonation of speech: "It is particularly the rising and falling intonation within words and sentences that reminds us of music" (quoted in Balázs 2021, 247). The concepts of tension and tension reduction are also present in the thought processes of Iván Fónagy¹³ and František Miko;¹⁴ when represented as curves, they closely resemble the internal proportions of various musical small and large forms, as well as their harmonic and tonal developments (periodisation, sonata form, modulation). If, considering this, we try to recite this sentence ("*Tutto è finito!*") in the musical modality written by Verdi it feels contrived and comical. In other words, in this instance the music does not follow the internal logic of speech, which is based on a descending intonation (even if the syllables [fih-nee] rise slightly before falling). This proves that if the music's dramaturgical purpose diverges from the possibilities offered by the text, it overrides the language's inherent musicality and shapes it in its own image. It is perhaps with this minor-second step that reality strikes Macbeth ("I have done the deed. One day I too shall be punished"). The three C notes crescendo towards this realisation.

A further innovation that supports the treatment of the phrase as a key sentence by Verdi is to be found in the augmentation (increase in duration). The musical notes show an increase in duration compared to the general speed of spoken language, if we accept my notation as a starting point. At a metronome tempo of 60 beats per minute, which is roughly equivalent to one second, the singing of Verdi's part takes almost twice as long as the rhythm I have formulated. The composer reinforces my hypothesis with the '*lento*' instruction, suggesting that a significant statement is being made here, one that stands out from its surroundings even within this recitative section. The motto-like nature of the musical phrase is reinforced by the pause that concludes it, marked by a *fermata* (a prolonged pause, a caesura), showing that it is only in the duet that follows, marked in the score, that

13 Iván Fónagy (1920–2005), Hungarian linguist and literary translator.

14 František Miko (1920–2010), Slovak philologist and theorist.

we return to musical time, to the realm of action, but now with the awareness that Damocles' fatal sword hangs over the heads of Macbeth and the Lady. My hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that the brief orchestral introduction to Act II is also built upon this motif and the emphasis on the minor second interval, as if to remind us that the crime cannot be undone and will sooner or later entail punishment.

To move from the art of language to the art of the sign, I must quote from two other, later Verdi works. The libretto by Antonio Somma, based on Eugène Scribe's play *Gustavus III, or The Masked Ball*, had a chequered history. The lengthy battle between the composer and the censors, discussed in Verdi biographies, is well known. *Un ballo in maschera* (*The Masked Ball*), a drama of politics and love, emerged as a compromise. This dual conception is defining in his oeuvre. In the story, King Gustav III of Sweden (Riccardo), who is having a secret affair with the wife (Amelia) of his best friend and secretary, is murdered at a masked ball by the cuckolded husband (Renato), who has conspired with the king's political opponents. From the perspective of my essay, the decisive scene is the secret tryst and its unmasking, in which Renato, having interrupted the monarch's amorous encounter, warns him that political conspirators intend to attack him. Riccardo flees, but the secretary and the veiled lady fall into the hands of the bandits. To prevent an armed clash, the lady reveals her identity, and the secretary recognises her as his own wife. Trembling, he sings: 'Amelia!'



Picture 3. Excerpt from the score of Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* (*A Masked Ball*) (original edition: Milan, Ricordi, 1914; reprint: Dover Publications, Mineola, NY, 1996, 329)

One of the high points of his oeuvre is *Aida*, premiered in 1871, with which Verdi seemed to bid farewell to the stage. (It is a fact that over the next fifteen years the Italian *maestro* produced no new stage works, 'only' revivals, and would break this silence with *Otello* in the spirit of renewing his own style.) The exotically themed *Aida* was commissioned by Egypt. The libretto is by Antonio Ghislanzoni. I quote a passage from the final scene, when the Egyptian general (Radames), condemned to death for treason, abandoned by everything and everyone, awaits

death in the depths of a rock tomb. Contemplating his fate, he is unable to accept that he will never again see his love, the Ethiopian princess (Aida), for whom he became a traitor. Verdi's instructions to Ghislanzoni remain precise and rigorous (Verdi 1951, 255): "*Tutto questa scena non può né deve essere che una scena di canto puro e semplice.*"¹⁵ The recitative nature of Radames' entrance, following the brief orchestral introduction, bears a strong resemblance to the phrase previously presented by Macbeth. For the sake of later elaboration, I present the full vocal part of the introduction.

The image displays a musical score excerpt from Verdi's *Aida*, featuring five staves of vocal music. The first staff is marked *voce cupa* and contains the lyrics "La fa.tal pie.tra so.vra me si chiu.se...". The second staff is marked *morendo* and contains "Ec.co la tom.ba mi.a.". The third staff is also marked *morendo* and contains "Del di la lu.ce più non ve.drò.....". The fourth staff contains "Non ri.vedrò più A.i.da...". The fifth staff is marked *dolcissimo* and contains "A.i.da, o.ve sei tu?". The music is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time, with a recitative-like quality.

Picture 4. Excerpt from the score of Verdi's *Aida* (original edition: Milan, Ricordi, 1913; reprint: Dover Publications, Mineola, NY, 1989, 414–415)

In both *The Masked Ball* and the score of *Aida*, whenever the two women's names are mentioned, the music departs from the tonal axis and then returns to it, just as it does during the minor-second step in the word '*finito*' in *Macbeth*. If we conduct

¹⁵ "This whole scene must not be, nor can it be, anything other than simple and pure song." (Translated to Hungarian by László Vadas.)

our analysis using the earlier tools, in accordance with Kodály's framework, the identity between spoken language (where the stress generally falls on the second syllable) and the musical realisation becomes apparent based on rhythm and stress patterns (the ratio of short to long syllables). However, the music says more here too: the second syllable of the names is a minim in 'Aida' and a full bar (!) in 'Amelia'. Compared to the preceding quaver, the 'i' and 'me' syllables become exaggerated, extremely drawn-out, hyper-expressive phenomena before falling back to the root note. In both cases, the situation is tragic and fateful. For Renato, this moment, this realisation, signifies the end of his former life, his ruin, his public disgrace, his personal failure. Indeed, we already know that he will also fall morally: by the end of the story, he will become a murderer. This sigh, sung with a loss of control, as Verdi instructs: "*fremendo*" ("trembling") marks a turning point in his life, and is also the source from which his revenge takes root. "*The time is out of joint. O cursed spite*"¹⁶—Renato might say with Hamlet, after Amelia's name—just as in Macbeth's "*finito*"—there is a *fermata* in the score (the world has been turned upside down, and the music has literally gone out of time with it). The 'plunge' back into the action (I use this word deliberately) is disconcertingly sobering. A comic-opera-style cadence follows, a cheerful, teasing melody that brings the

(sogghignando)

Sam. Ve', se di not - te qui col - la spo - sa

Viol. *p con eleganza*

V-le *p*

Vc. *p*

Cb. *p*

Andante mosso quasi allegretto ♩ = 66

Picture 5. Excerpt from the score of Verdi's opera *Un ballo in maschera* (A Masked Ball) (original edition: Milan, Ricordi, 1914; reprint: Dover Publications, Mineola, NY, 1996, 329)

16 Shakespeare: *Hamlet*. Excerpt from Act I, Scene 5 (translated to Hungarian by János Arany).

scene closer to the *dramma giocoso* genre.¹⁷ Instead of the (expected) vengeful, tragic or even terrifying continuation, Verdi brilliantly outdoes the catharsis, and the biting mockery deals a devastating blow to the husband and wife, who—to borrow the bandits' mocking words—arrange a secret rendezvous with each other that night. I quote an excerpt from the score.

The same initial paralysis can be observed in Radames' recitative. We hear the rhythmic prose of a prisoner, recited in a single tone, cut off from the world, from light, from life, and oblivious to the passing of time. The final words of the phrases (<mia,> <chiuse,> <vedrò>) are minims—[mee, cue, roh]—corresponding to the long syllables, and Verdi signals, with an instruction that seems trivial, that oxygen is running out! The end of the lines must be softened not merely because of Western musical tradition, but in accordance with the written '*diminuendo*' ('gradually decreasing in volume') and '*morendo*' ('fading away'). Radames is fighting for his life. His strength is waning, and only the image of the person who matters most to him—Aida—can rouse him from this state. After the minor-second shift, Radames' melody and very being come to life, returning to the present moment, and its monotony vanishes (Lendvai 2002, 40). The minor-second interval expands into a major sixth, and the instruction '*dolcissimo*' ('sweetly, softly') appears above the vocal line. Yet his situation remains hopeless. '*Aida, ove sei tu?*' ('Dove sei tu?') In English: 'Where are you?' Aida only emerges from her hiding place a few seconds later. At this moment, Radames believes she fled when he was captured. For him, everything is lost: home, honour, love, happiness. The question of timbre in both scenes is conveyed by the composer's written instructions. The dynamics, and with them the internal energy of the upward movement, and its subsequent recoil embody the aforementioned Fónagy–Miko theory of tension-reduction, which corresponds to the tension-resolution relationship in classical music, akin to breathing, a sign of life. Three different scenes, three identical life situations, a seemingly consistent authorial *ars poetica*. Are these parallels and insights conclusive? Can this musical solution be regarded as a process of meaning-making, a recurring interplay between signified and signifier? What does it signify? Can we call upon the science of semiotics to help answer this? I shall attempt to do so. I trust the reader will accept my endeavours in this spirit.

17 *Dramma giocoso* (Italian), meaning 'playful drama'. A musical work combining elements of *opera seria* and *opera buffa*.

When we speak of strong similarity or identity, the poetic image of the metaphor may come to mind. The verbal image of the metaphor establishes an even closer connection between concepts than the simile. According to Géza Balázs: "Our thinking is driven by two modes of association: contiguity and similarity" (Balázs 2021, 205). C. S. Peirce, the founder of modern semiotics, calls a sign that refers based on similarity an icon. Zsigmond Zalabai takes the definition further: "A metaphor is a tool of suggestion and implication [...], it affects the imagination and the creation of images [...]. Knowledge of convention is often indispensable for the correct interpretation of the 'metaphorical' word" (ibid., 234). On this basis, the metaphor is an icon as a sign, but also a symbol in the sense of convention.

We have reached tricky territory: semiotics is the science of communication, a tool of linguistics among other things, and it is questionable whether it can be applied to artistic representation, artistic communication, specifically the genre of opera, in the case of the symbiosis of music and text. At the beginning of my essay, I explained that expression and dramatisation, as aesthetic principles, became defining concepts in classical music from the 1600s onwards for centuries. Some means of transmission had to be found for the human mind to comprehend and assimilate this concept. The *figurato* and *madrigal* mentioned as examples already carried those signs (rhythmic, harmonic and structural elements) which, over the years, formed a system of signs, pointing to something inherent in the text. After a while, anyone skilled in reading these signs could recognise the elements of the system, and so they became conventions. "First, one learns and interprets the new signs. Then one tries to handle and use them. And finally, one attempts to produce similar or new signs"—writes Mihály Szívós in relation to linguistic phenomena (ibid., 206). The same may well have occurred in the language of music. It follows that the integration, utilisation and shaping of these signs within the composer's workshop resulted in distinctive, individual stylistic features, and this was not confined solely to vocal art. In this light, in the quoted Verdi excerpts, alongside the minor second that appears, the gesture of retreat—the downward-sloping so-called sigh motif—plays an equally important role. This is a symbol of lamentation and weeping, and one of the conventions of the toolkit of musical dramatisation. It would be a cliché and a platitude to state that we hear the sighs of Macbeth, Renato and Radames. We have seen that convention is merely a tool, and in the hands of a great master it becomes part of a new, complex reality.

Macbeth's key line was: "*Tutto è finito!*" ("It is all over.") Is it possible for the heroes of *Un ballo in maschera* and *Aida* to convey this meaning? We have seen that, in a similar situation, Renato and Radames are only able to sing or utter a single word instead of this phrase. Yet the names of their loves (Amelia/Aida) were the most important to them right up to the moment they were uttered. They represented life itself. The names (signifiers) in themselves point to happiness (signified), but they become symbols of loss, which affects the male heroes existentially. Verdi and his librettists convey the same message through two female names as Macbeth had previously articulated. Macbeth's musical phrase, as an abstract sign (icon), carries its essence, that split-second shift, in the figures of Amelia and Aida, becoming a symbol of the tragic end. Here, there is no longer any need for the specific sentence to be spoken. The brief appearance and the departing sigh, encapsulated in female names, carry the fateful motto, unspoken. At this point, Verdi reaches the psychological depths of Wagner's Musikdramas, and since "knowledge of convention is often indispensable for the correct interpretation of the 'metaphorical' word" (ibid., 234), the conventional sigh motif of music history acquires its ultimate meaning in this context. Such discoveries and connections are common in Verdi's creative workshop. On this subject, the research, and published works of Péter Várnai¹⁸ and Ernő Lendvai¹⁹ are noteworthy. Music history associates the conscious use of recurring leitmotifs, which are organically woven into the music drama, with the name of Richard Wagner. Nonetheless, I hope this study has shown that Verdi was by no means a less conscious artist, and that he was capable of penetrating, consciously or unconsciously, into such deep layers of the human soul and psyche, a characteristic of artistic greatness.

I trust that I have succeeded in fulfilling my undertaking: to demonstrate, with the aid of the tools of linguistics and semiotics, that music and words are concepts that presuppose one another, interact with one another, and are capable of revealing contexts of meaning. In conclusion, let me quote Verdi's thoughts (Várnai 1978, 5): "My notes, whether beautiful or ugly, are never the product of chance, and I always want to say something with them."

18 Péter Várnai (1922–1992), music historian and music critic. In his work *Verdi operakalauz* ('Verdi Opera Guide'), he analyses the works in detail.

19 Ernő Lendvai (1925–1993), music historian, musicologist and university lecturer. Doctor of Musicology. In his book *Verdi és a 20. század* ('Verdi and the 20th Century'), he provides an in-depth music-theoretical analysis of individual pieces from the oeuvre.

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