

Program Notes

By John Shepard

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Opera lovers have no trouble imagining an alternate universe where people sing instead of speak (in fact, this opera lover has more difficulty with musicals and operettas, in which characters sing *and* speak). A similar suspension of disbelief is needed to appreciate the chorus in an opera, a crowd of people who react to events on stage not only with singing but also with synchronized declamation of text. The fact that few crowds in our existence speak in sync (except occasionally in picket lines or protest marches) has not prevented many operatic choral numbers from becoming as famous as those show-stopping arias sung by star soloists. And in many great operas—Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* and Britten’s *Peter Grimes* come to mind—the chorus becomes a “character” as important as any of the individual actors on stage.

When the curtain is raised on the first act of Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1867), no suspension of disbelief is required, because the crowd is doing what crowds often do in church: singing a hymn. While the congregation sings its chorale, the instrumental accompaniment reflects the silent drama of this scene, Walther von Stolzing’s longing glances at the young Eva Pogner, seated in a pew at the back of the nave of Nuremberg’s Church of St. Katharine.

At the opening of Act II of Christoph Willibald Gluck’s *Orphée et Eurydice* (the 1774 French version of his 1762 *Orfeo ed Euridice*), the chorus takes on the role of the band of Furies and demons guarding the entrance to Hades. In his quest for the deceased Eurydice, Orpheus seeks to enter Hades, but the Furies block his way. Orpheus gradually calms—and ultimately moves—the Furies with his singing, so that they finally let him pass.

George Bizet’s *The Pearl Fishers* (1863) is a tale of love, jealousy, and redemption set in ancient Ceylon (today’s Sri Lanka). In the prayer to Brahma, the Hindu god of creation, the priestess Leïla tries to resist her attraction to the young fisherman Nadir, and—with choral support—reaffirms her religious vows. But when Nadir presents himself, Leïla’s prayer becomes the declaration of love that concludes the

first act. The scene of the second act is the ruins of an Indian temple. From off stage, a chorus welcomes the night (“L’ombre descend des cieux”: “Darkness is descending from the heavens”). In the next scene, Leïla sings a cavatina (“Comme autrefois”: “As in the old days”) expressing her joy at Nadir’s impending arrival.

The “Humming Chorus” from Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904) closes the first part of Act II, as Cio-Cio San, her child, and her maid Suzuki settle down for a night of waiting for the return of Cio-Cio San’s American husband, Lieutenant Pinkerton.

The title character in Antonín Dvořák’s *Rusalka* (1900) is a water nymph who, having fallen in love with a prince who swims in her lake, longs to assume human form. Her “Song to the Moon,” richly evocative of the Bohemian forest, begs the moon to tell her beloved that she waits for him.

Verdi’s *Nabucco* (*Nebuchadnezzar*, 1842) depicts the trials of the Israelites at the hands of the Babylonians. In the Act III chorus “Va pensiero,” the Israelites held prisoners in Babylon express longing for their homeland. Roger Parker has written that

the Hebrews’ choral lament is the most famous piece in *Nabucco*, perhaps in all Verdi. It is deliberately simple, almost incantatory in its rhythmic tread, unvaried phrase pattern, and primarily unison texture; and by these means it creates that powerful sense of nostalgia which, later in the century, gave the chorus its status as a symbol of Italian national aspirations.

As the Israelites longed to be free of Babylonian rule, so the Italians longed for independence from Austria.

The title of Giacomo Puccini’s *La Rondine* (“The Swallow,” 1917) refers to the central character Magda, who seeks true love but is thwarted by her past life as a “kept woman.” The second act of the opera is set in a popular Parisian restaurant, lively with the revels of students, artists, and street people. Ruggero, the object of Magda’s growing affection, begins the quartet “Bevo al tuo fresco sorriso” (“I drink to your fresh smile”), then is joined by Magda, her romantically involved friends Lisette and Prunier, and the chorus of revelers.

In Puccini’s last opera *Turandot* (completed by Franco Alfano after Puccini’s death in 1924), Prince Calaf woos the beautiful—yet cold-hearted and cruel—Princess Turandot. A suitor of the Princess must answer her three riddles; if he gives a single

incorrect answer, he will be beheaded. Calaf, who has concealed his royal lineage, answers all three riddles, but when Turandot balks at her betrothal, he offers her a way out: if she can guess his name by dawn, he will give up her hand and consent to his own execution. At the beginning of Act III, the Princess has commanded that—on pain of death—no one in Peking shall sleep until her successful suitor's name is known. In his aria "Nessun dorma" ("Let no one sleep"), Calaf resolves to keep his name a secret.

Roger Parker's remarks above notwithstanding, the triumphal scene from Verdi's *Aida* (1871) rivals "Va pensiero" as his best known number, at least outside of Italy. Less well known—but deserving of repeated hearings—is the chorus of Scottish refugees ("Patria oppressa!") from Verdi's *Macbeth* (1847; revised 1865), which Parker describes as "one of the composer's greatest choral movements, with subtle details of harmony and rhythm in almost every bar."

Ruggero Leoncavallo wrote his opera *La Bohème* (1897) in direct competition with Puccini, whose opera of the same name premiered in February 1896. In Act II of Leoncavallo's version, the seamstress Musetta has bonded with the painter Marcello, only to see her possessions thrown out of her apartment into the courtyard, after the banker she had been seeing stopped paying her rent. Undeterred, once she sees that her furniture is taken to the pawnbroker, she holds a party for her friends in the courtyard, and they entertain each other by singing. Musetta's contribution is "Da quel suon soavemente" ("Sweetly intoxicated by that sound").

Do cads get all the good tunes? Maybe not always, but in Verdi's *Rigoletto* (1851), the despicable Duke of Mantua does. Verdi knew "La donna è mobile" would be a hit, so he made sure that rehearsals in Venice were conducted with the utmost secrecy, so that the aria would not get leaked to one of the city's singing gondoliers.

In Pietro Mascagni's one-act opera *Cavalleria rusticana* ("Rustic Chivalry," 1890), the action takes place in a Sicilian town square adjacent to a church. When the off-stage church choir sings the "Regina coeli," Mamma Lucia leads the peasants in the square in a fervent prayer in response.

Toward the end of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791), the sun shines forth, Sarastro (the Priest of the Sun) consecrates the union of Tamino and Pamina, and the

Queen of the Night and her minions are banished. The radiant E-flat-major chorus “Heil sei euch Geweihten!” (“Hail chosen ones!”) brings the opera to a brilliant close.