Meet the Composer
Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi
(October 9 or 10, 1813 – January 27, 1901) by Jill Leahy

Giuseppe Verdi, born in a small village in Parma in northern Italy, was 20 years old when he moved to Milan to continue his studies. In 1839 he produced his first successful opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*. When his next opera failed, he was ready to give up composing. Fortunately for us, his friend Bartolomeo Merelli encouraged him to continue writing operas. Charles Osborne, in *The Complete Operas of Verdi*, relates a wonderful story about Verdi’s creation of *Nabucco*, the opera that was “born under a lucky star” and launched his career.

After repeatedly telling Verdi about the libretto by Solera, Merelli forced Verdi to read it. Verdi said, “When I got home, I threw the manuscript on the table with a violent gesture, and stood staring at it. It had fallen open, and without realizing it I gazed at the page and read the line: “Va pensiero, sull’ali dorate.” According to the story, Verdi was deeply moved and read many passages from the Bible, but he was determined not to compose any more and took the libretto back to Merelli. “My friend said, 'Set it to music. Set it to music!' And with that, he took the libretto and thrust it in my overcoat pocket. One day a verse, the next day another, at one time a note, at another a phrase. Little by little the opera was written.”

Verdi delivered the opera *Nabucco* to Merelli in the autumn of 1841, and because it was so late in the season and the schedule was already full, Merelli couldn’t afford new scenery or costumes but promised to use whatever he could from his warehouse. According to Verdi, at the 1842 premiere, “The refashioned costumes looked splendid. The old scenery, touched up by the painter Perroni, made an extraordinary impression. The first scene in the temple, for instance, produced such an effect that the audience applauded for ten minutes.”

Aren’t we lucky to benefit from both Merelli’s and Verdi’s persistence?

By Jill Leahy

**Pittsburgh Opera**

**Study Guide to the Opera**

**Music by Giuseppe Verdi**

**Libretto by Temistocle Solera**

**NABUCCO**

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**Drama Rooted in History . . . Rising from Family Tragedy**

At the age of 25 in 1839, Verdi experienced moderate success with his first opera, *Oberto*, at La Scala. However, following the deaths of his infant children and then his wife, his next opera, *Un giorno di regno*, failed. Verdi, in despair, decided to give up composing. Bartolomeo Merelli, La Scala’s manager, gave the *Nabucco* libretto to Verdi, who at first refused to read it.

The libretto for *Nabucco* (short for Nabucodonosor; in English, Nebuchadnezzar) is based on biblical stories from the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Daniel (along with Kings, Chronicles, and Psalms), an 1836 play by Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornue, and a ballet adaptation of the play by Antonio Cortese. The principal story in *Nabucco* is about the Assyrian conquest of Judah and the Babylonian captivity of the Hebrews. However, many music historians have written about the parallels to the state of Italy at the time. Italy was not united as a country; many areas were under the control of Austria and France, and the Italian people were fomenting Risorgimento, or re-unification. When *Nabucco* was first performed at La Scala on March 9, 1842 under its original name of *Nabucodonosor*, the audience response was overwhelming and the Italian public regarded it as a symbol of the struggle against Austrian rule in northern Italy.

The question is still being argued today: Did Verdi intentionally create a “political opera” or, once he saw the result, did he then become a spokesman for Italian freedom?
Meet the Librettist

Temistocle Solera (1815–1878) was a professional librettist and composer of moderate success. He wrote the libretto for Verdi’s first opera, Oberto, and in addition to Nabucco, the later operas I Lombardi, Giovanna d’Arco, and Attila.

Solera used several books in the Old Testament as sources for the Nabucco libretto, as well as the 1836 play by Auguste Aniet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornue. Solera also relied heavily on Antonio Cortese’s ballet adaptation of the play.

Temistocle Solera was a larger-than-life character. He spoke “in torrents” and swore profusely. His life story reads like a novel: “While his father languished in the dreaded Spielberg prison, he was educated in Vienna, ran away to join a circus, completed his studies in Milan and Pavia, and, in his early twenties, published books of verse.” After working with Verdi on several more operas, Solera followed his wife to Spain, where he became director of productions in Madrid. He later returned to Italy and died in poverty.