

# Major differences between Shakespeare's *Othello* and Verdi's *Otello*

by Jill Leahy

Shakespeare <i>Othello</i> (1603)	Verdi <i>Otello</i> (1887)
Shakespeare based his <i>Othello</i> play on a short story, <i>Un Capitano Moro</i> ("A Moorish Captain"), by Girardo Cinthio, published in 1565. Shakespeare modified elements from the original to suit the theater, around 1603-1604.	The librettist Arrigo Boito knew and loved the works of Shakespeare and this is apparent in his libretto. Though fitting the play to the needs of the opera, he stayed true to the story. His libretto is considered a masterpiece in its own right, along with Verdi's music.
Play in 5 acts	Opera in 4 acts
Begins in Venice, moves to Cyprus. Storm in Act II.	Begins and ends in Cyprus. Opens with the storm.
<b>Characters:</b> <b>Othello</b> <b>Desdemona</b> <b>Iago</b> <b>Michael Cassio</b> <b>Emilia</b> <b>Roderigo</b> <b>Lodovico</b> <b>Montano</b>  <b>Bianca</b> , Cassio's lover <b>Brabantio</b> , Gratiano's brother <b>Duke of Venice</b> , or "Doge" <b>Gratiano</b> , Brabantio's brother <b>Clown</b>  Officers, Gentlemen, Messenger, Herald, Sailor, Attendants, Musicians, etc.	<b>Characters:</b> <b>Otello</b> <b>Desdemona</b> <b>Iago</b> <b>Cassio</b> <b>Emilia</b> <b>Roderigo</b> <b>Lodovico</b> <b>Montano</b>  <b>Herald</b>  Soldiers and sailors from Venice and the people of Cyprus.
Desdemona's handkerchief plays a major role	Desdemona's handkerchief plays a major role
Desdemona sings a song about a willow	Desdemona sings the "Willow Song," and her prayer, "Ave Maria"
Othello suffocates Desdemona	Otello smothers Desdemona

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### A WORLD RECORD:

*After Plácido Domingo performed the title role in Verdi's Otello in Vienna on July 30, 1991, the audience clapped for one hour and 20 minutes (and 101 curtain calls), setting a new world record for the longest applause ever.*

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E D U C A T I O N

Study Guide to the Opera

Otello

Music by Giuseppe Verdi  
 Libretto by Arrigo Boito

This postcard, after Lionello Balestrieri, depicting Verdi composing the opera *Otello*, is for sale as a poster. Visit this website: [www.1st-art-gallery.com/after-Balestrieri-Lionello/Postcard-Depicting-Giuseppe-Verdi-\(1813-1901\)-Composing-The-Opera-Otello.html](http://www.1st-art-gallery.com/after-Balestrieri-Lionello/Postcard-Depicting-Giuseppe-Verdi-(1813-1901)-Composing-The-Opera-Otello.html)



## He "loved not wisely, but too well . . ."

*Otello*, Shakespeare

By all accounts, Giuseppe Verdi loved Shakespeare. Although the composer couldn't read English, with the help of his wife, he read many translations of Shakespeare's plays and had strong opinions about which translations did justice to what he felt were Shakespeare's dramatic ideals. After the success of his opera *Macbeth* (1847), Verdi composed 12 more operas, until in 1871, when he completed *Aida*, he thought he had finished his career. But his publisher, Ricordi, and his wife, Giuseppina, insisted that Rossini's *Otello* had done a disservice to Shakespeare, and they finally convinced Verdi to compose his own opera based on the play. Once convinced, Verdi began working on ideas for what he referred to as his opera *Jago*.

While Verdi himself pared down the play *Macbeth* to opera size, he was fortunate to have a recognized poet and composer, Arrigo Boito, as the librettist for the work that Verdi eventually conceded should be called *Otello*. While Shakespeare's *Othello* has over 3,500 lines, Boito was able to reduce it to a mere 800 lines, and still create what is considered a "masterpiece of operatic literature." Despite eliminating the entire first act of the play, most scholars agree that all the essentials remain. With Verdi's musical genius and Boito's skilled writing and editing, the world was given an unforgettable opera, which, at its debut at *La Scala* on February 5, 1887, earned the composer 20 curtain calls.

by Jill Leahy

*Instead of Otello being an Italian opera written in the style of Shakespeare, Otello is a play written by Shakespeare in the style of an Italian opera.*

George Bernard Shaw



# Otello Synopsis

Setting: Cyprus, late 15<sup>th</sup> century

**ACT I** Cypriots watch anxiously from the shore as a fierce storm batters the Venetian fleet sent to defend their island from the invading Turks. The Moor Otello, a Venetian general and governor of Cyprus, lands safely and announces the destruction of the Turkish fleet. Iago, Otello's ensign, confers with Roderigo, who is in love with Desdemona, who recently married Otello. Iago reveals his hatred for Otello, who promoted Cassio over him. Celebrating victory, Iago sets out to get Cassio drunk (**Inaffia l'ugola**). As Cassio grows tipsy, Iago provokes a fight between Roderigo and Cassio. Montano, the former governor, tries to separate them, but Cassio attacks him as well. Otello appears and is furious about their behavior. When Desdemona is disturbed by the commotion, he takes away Cassio's recent promotion and commands everyone to leave. He is alone with Desdemona (**Già nella notte densa s'estingue ogni clamor**).

Intermission

**ACT II** Iago advises Cassio to present his case to Desdemona, saying that her influence on Otello will get him reinstated. Once alone, Iago declares his belief that a cruel God created man wicked and that life has no meaning (**Credo in un Dio crudel**). When Otello enters, Iago casually remarks about Desdemona's fidelity and when she approaches and brings up the question of Cassio's demotion, Otello is angered, complaining of a headache. She offers a handkerchief to cool his forehead, but he throws it to the ground. Her attendant Emilia, who is Iago's wife, picks it up but Iago seizes it from her. Alone with Otello, Iago invents a story of seeing Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's hand. Exploding with rage and jealousy, Otello swears vengeance, and Iago joins in the oath (**Sì, pel ciel marmoreo giuro**).

Intermission

**ACT III** A herald informs Otello of the imminent arrival of Venetian ambassadors. Desdemona enters, and Otello speaks calmly until she revives the subject of Cassio. When Otello demands the handkerchief he gave her, she again pleads for Cassio. Unable to control his fury, Otello accuses her of infidelity. He hides as Iago returns with Cassio. Iago flashes the handkerchief he stole and leads the conversation with Cassio so that Otello overhears only fragments, and assumes they are talking about Desdemona. Lodovico arrives, telling Otello he has been recalled to Venice and that Cassio is to govern Cyprus. Losing control, Otello pushes his wife to the floor, and clears the room. As he collapses in a seizure, Iago gloats over him.

**ACT IV** Emilia helps Desdemona prepare for bed. Frightened, Desdemona sings of a maiden forsaken by her lover (**Willow Song: Piangea cantando nell'erma landa**), and then says an emotional goodnight to Emilia and recites her prayers (**Ave Maria**). As soon as she has fallen asleep, Otello enters and wakes Desdemona with a kiss. When Otello starts talking about killing her, she protests her innocence, but Otello strangles her. Emilia knocks with news that Cassio has killed Roderigo. Shocked to find the dying Desdemona, she summons help. Iago's plot is finally revealed and Otello realizes what he has done. After reflecting on his past glory, he pulls out a dagger and stabs himself, dying with a final kiss for his wife.

Courtesy of Opera News



Special issue of the periodical *Illustrazione Italiana*, dedicated to the premiere of *Otello* by Giuseppe Verdi, 1887.

# Characters of the Opera

**Otello** [oh-TELL-oh] *tenor*  
A Moor, general of the Venetian army, who is passionately in love with and jealous of his wife.

**Desdemona** [dez-DAY-moh-nah] *soprano*  
Otello's Venetian wife, an innocent victim of Iago's evil plot.

**Iago** [YAH-goh] *baritone*  
An ensign in Otello's army, who carries out his evil plan to ensure the destruction of both Otello and Cassio.

**Cassio** [KAH-see-oh] *tenor*  
Otello's Venetian captain, an honest young soldier who has no idea of the passions swirling around him.

**Emilia** [eh-MEEL-yah] *mezzo-soprano*  
Iago's wife and Desdemona's maid, who is torn between loyalty to her evil husband and her mistress.

**Lodovico** [loh-doh-VEE-koh] *bass*  
An ambassador of the Venetian Republic.

**Montano** [mohn-TAHN-oh] *bass*  
Otello's predecessor as Governor of Cyprus.

**Roderigo** [roh-deh-REE-goh] *tenor*  
A Venetian gentleman.

**Un Araldo** [oon ah-RAHL-do] *bass*  
A herald.

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Venetian soldiers and sailors  
Cypriot townsfolk and children

# Meet the Composer and the Librettist

by Jill Leahy

**Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi** (1813–1901), born in a small village in the province of Parma in northern Italy, was 20 when he moved to Milan to continue his studies. In 1839 his first opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*, was modestly successful. His next work, a comic opera, known variously as *Un Giorno di Regno* and *Il Finto Stanislao*, was written during the time when his wife and two children died in the course of two months. The opera was a failure and Verdi vowed to stop composing operas. *La Scala's* impresario, Bartolomeo Merelli, convinced him to write *Nabucco*, which made Verdi famous.



During the next decade, Verdi did nothing but compose. Some scholars believe that *Macbeth*, written in 1847, is "the most original and important opera that Verdi wrote." With it, Verdi broke a basic convention in 19th-century Italian opera by writing an opera without a love story. Other scholars and critics consider *Otello*, which premiered in Milan in 1887, to be Verdi's greatest tragic opera, "containing some of his most beautiful, expressive music and some of his richest characterizations." Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff*, based on Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV, Part 1*, was an international success and one of the canon's most notable comic operas.

Verdi loved the works of Shakespeare and seemed to feel an affinity for the Bard even though he could neither read nor speak English. As the writer Garry Wills wrote: "The two men worked in theater conditions with many similarities. Both were supplying performances on a heavy schedule, to audiences with a voracious appetite for what they wrote." So while there are hundreds of operas made from Shakespeare's plays, only the three that Verdi composed are still considered to be masterpieces today—*Macbeth*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*.

**Arrigo Boito** (aka **Enrico Giuseppe Giovanni Boito**) (1842–1918) was an Italian poet and musical composer born in Padua. He came from a talented and cultured family: his father was an artist, his mother was a Polish countess, and his brother was an architect, engineer, and art historian. Boito studied music at the Milan Conservatory but was already showing signs that he loved literature more than music. Boito wrote of his career and relationship with Verdi: "The voluntary servitude I consecrated to that just, most noble, and truly great man is the act of my life that gives me the most satisfaction."

