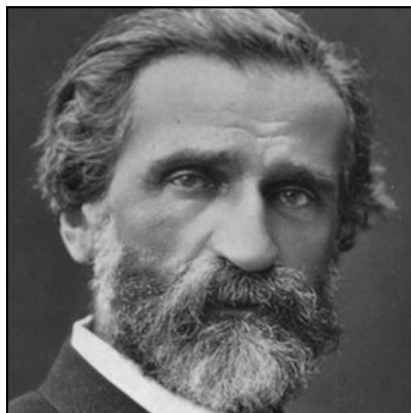


## Meet the Composer

### 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, grabbed me by the shoulders and not only pushed me out of the room but locked the door in my face. What was I to do? I went home with *Nabucco* in my 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?

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#### "Va pensiero, sull'ali dorate" (Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves)

Fly, thought, on wings of gold;  
go settle upon the slopes and the hills,  
where, soft and mild, the sweet airs  
of our native land smell fragrant!

Greet the banks of the Jordan  
and Zion's toppled towers . . .  
Oh, my country, so beautiful and lost!  
Oh, remembrance, so dear and so fatal!

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# Nabucco

Music by Giuseppe Verdi • Libretto by Temistocle Solera

# PITTSBURGH OPERA E D U C A T I O N

## Study Guide to the Opera



Photo from Israeli Opera production of *Nabucco* at the Masada (Hebrew for "fortress"), located atop an isolated rock cliff at the western end of the Judean Desert overlooking the Dead Sea. On the east side, the rock falls in a sheer drop of about 450 meters to the Dead Sea, and on the western edge it stands about 100 meters above the surrounding terrain.  
[www.fromthegrapevine.com](http://www.fromthegrapevine.com)

### 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.



Nabucco, 1842  
costume sketch

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?

by Jill Leahy

## Nabucco Synopsis

Setting: Jerusalem and Babylon, 6th century B.C.E.

### Part I JERUSALEM

#### The Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem

Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I shall deliver this city into the hand of the King of Babylon, and he will burn it with fire. (Jeremiah 21:10)

The Israelites are praying for help against Nabucco (Nebuchadnezzar), king of Babylon, who

has attacked them and is vandalizing the city (**Gli arredi festivi giù cadano infranti / Throw down and destroy all festive decorations**). Zaccaria, their high priest, enters with Nabucco's daughter, Fenena, whom the Hebrews hold hostage. He reassures his people that the Lord will not forsake them (**D'Egitto là su i lidi / On the shores of Egypt He saved the life of Moses**). As the Israelites leave, Ismaele, nephew of the king of Jerusalem, is left alone with Fenena. The two fell in love during Ismaele's imprisonment in Babylon. Fenena helped him escape and followed him to Jerusalem. Their conversation is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Fenena's half-sister, Abigaille, and a band of disguised Babylonian soldiers. Abigaille, who is also in love with Ismaele, tells him that she can save his people if he will return her love, but he refuses. The Israelites rush back into the temple in a panic. When Nabucco enters with his warriors, Zaccaria confronts him, threatening to kill Fenena (**Viva Nabucco / Long live Nabucco**). Ismaele disarms the priest and delivers Fenena to her father. Nabucco orders the destruction of the temple.

### Part II THE IMPIOUS ONE

#### Nabucco's palace in Babylon

Behold, the whirlwind of the Lord goeth forth, it shall fall upon the head of the wicked (Jeremiah 30:23)

Nabucco has appointed Fenena regent while he is away at the wars. Abigaille, back in the royal palace in Babylon, has found a document saying that she is not the king's daughter but the child of slaves. Foreseeing a future in which Fenena and Ismaele will rule together over Babylon, she swears vengeance

on Nabucco and Fenena (**Anch'io dischiuso un giorno / I too once opened my heart to happiness**). The High Priest of Baal arrives with news that Fenena has freed the Israelite prisoners. As a result of her treason, he offers the throne to Abigaille and proposes to spread the rumor that Nabucco has fallen in battle (**Salgo già del trono aurato / I already ascend the [bloodstained] seat of the golden throne**).

Elsewhere in the palace, Zaccaria prays for inspiration to persuade the Babylonians to give up their false idols (**Vieni, o Levita / Come, oh Levite! [Bring me the tables of the law]**). Ismaele enters and the assembled Levites accuse him of treachery, but Zaccaria announces that he has been pardoned for saving a fellow Israelite—the newly converted Fenena. An officer rushes in to warn Fenena that the king is dead and her life is in danger. Before she can escape, the High Priest of Baal arrives with Abigaille and the Babylonians, who proclaim Abigaille ruler. She is about to crown

## Characters

**Nabucco** [nah-BOO-kkoh] *baritone*  
King of Babylon

**Abigaille** [ah-bee-gah-EEL-leh] *soprano*  
A slave, presumed to be Nabucco's elder daughter

**Zaccaria** [dzahk-kah-REE-ah] *bass*  
High priest of the Hebrews

**Ismaele** [eez-mah-EH-leh] *tenor*  
Nephew of the King of Jerusalem

**Fenena** [fey-NAY-nah] *mezzo*  
Nabucco's daughter

**High Priest** *bass*

**Anna** [AHN-nah] *soprano*  
Zaccaria's sister

**Abdallo** [ahb-DAHL-loh] *tenor*  
Babylonian soldier – an old officer of Nabucco

#### Other Roles

Babylonian Soldiers, Hebrew Soldiers, Levites, Hebrew Virgins, Babylonian Virgins, Babylonian Ladies, Magi, Babylonian Rulers, Slaves

### Nabucco Synopsis continued

herself when, to the astonishment of all, Nabucco appears. He snatches the crown from her, faces the crowd and declares himself not only their king but their god (**Non son più re, son dio / I am no longer King! I am God!**). For this blasphemy, a thunderbolt strikes him down. Abigaille, triumphant, retrieves the crown for herself.

#### Intermission

### Part III THE PROPHECY The Hanging Gardens of Babylon

Therefore the wild beasts of the desert with the wild beasts of the islands shall dwell there, and the owls shall dwell therein. (Jeremiah 50:39)

The Babylonians hail Abigaille as their ruler. The High Priest urges her to have the Israelites killed, but before she can give the

order, the disheveled Nabucco wanders in. Abigaille dismisses the crowd and, alone with Nabucco, tricks him into signing the death warrant for the captive Israelites. He asks what will happen to Fenena, and Abigaille replies that she too must die. When Nabucco tries to find in his garments the document proving Abigaille's ancestry, she produces it and tears it to pieces. He pleads in vain for Fenena's life (**Oh di qual onta aggravasi questo mio crin canuto / Oh, what shame must my old head suffer**).

Along the banks of the Euphrates, the Israelites rest from forced labor, their thoughts turning to their homeland. (**Va pensiero, sull'ali dorate / Fly thought, on golden wings**). Zaccaria predicts that they will overcome captivity and obliterate Babylon with God's help.

### Part IV THE BROKEN IDOL Nabucco's royal apartments

Bel is confounded, Merodach is broken in pieces; her idols are confounded, her images are broken in pieces. (Jeremiah 50:2)

From a window in his apartment, where he has been locked up by Abigaille, Nabucco watches Fenena and the Israelites being led to

execution. Desperate, he prays to the god of Israel for forgiveness, pledging to convert himself and his people (**Dio di Giuda / God of Judah!**). His sanity restored, he forces open the door and summons his soldiers to regain the throne and save his daughter.

In the Hanging Gardens, the Israelites are about to be executed (**Va! La palma del martirio / Go, win the palm of martyrdom**). Fenena prays to be received into heaven when Nabucco rushes in and stops the sacrifice. Abigaille, full of remorse, takes poison and dies, confessing her crimes and praying to the god of Israel to pardon her. Nabucco announces his conversion and frees the Israelites, telling them to return to their native land and rebuild their temple. Israelites and Babylonians unite in praising God.

Adapted from the Metropolitan Opera

## Meet the Librettist



by Jill Leahy

**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 Anicet-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.

(<http://www.ontopia.net/operamap/librettist.jsp?id=solera>)  
([www.groovemusic.com](http://www.groovemusic.com))