

It is 1840, and Giuseppe Verdi is on the verge of giving-up his musical career.

It's been a tough year. After taking his two children, death has also claimed Verdi's beloved wife Margherita. His second opera, "King for a Day," is dead-on-arrival at La Scala (Milan's famous opera house).

Emotionally upset, and in the throes of depression, Verdi makes a decision. He will do something else to earn a living. He's finished with composing music.

Then ... an unexpected encounter gives Verdi a second chance.

On a Milan street, the composer sees Bartolomeo Merelli (known as La Scala's impresario). He has the words to a new opera which he'd like Verdi to examine.

Uninterested in writing music for any new libretto, Verdi declines the invitation. Even so, he takes the work - called *Nabucco* ("Nebuchadnezzar") - home with him. Maybe he'll look at it later.

During a sleepless night, Verdi reaches for the manuscript. He opens the pages to Part 3 and sees these words:

*Va pensiero, sull' ali dorate* (Italian for "Fly, thought, on wings of gold").

Intrigued by the beautiful words, Verdi reconsiders his plan to stop writing music. In 1841, he composes a score for *Nabucco* which makes him world-famous.

Setting aside the emotional impact of the melodious music itself, Verdi's opera appears at an opportune time. The story line - of the Hebrew people trying to break the bondage of their Babylonian captivity - resonates with the Italian people (who want their own nation).

*Va, Pensiero* - the aria which aroused Verdi's interest in Temistocle Solera's libretto - becomes Italy's unofficial national anthem soon after *Nabucco*'s premiere at La Scala. People in Italy find parallels between the opera's story and their own predicament (as they seek freedom from Austrian control).

What are the words to *Va, Pensiero*?

In Italian:

*Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate;  
Va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli,  
ove olezzano tepide e molli  
l'aure dolci del suolo natal!  
Del Giordano le rive saluta,  
di Sionne le torri atterrate...  
Oh mia Patria sì bella e perduta!  
O membranza sì cara e fatal!  
Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati,  
perché muta dal salice pendi?  
Le memorie nel petto raccendi,  
ci favella del tempo che fu!  
O simile di Solima ai fati,  
traggi un suono di crudo lamento;  
o t'ispiri il Signore un concerto  
che ne infonda al patire virtù!*

The lyrics, in English translation:

*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 lovely and lost!  
Oh, remembrance so dear and so fraught with despair!  
Golden harp of the prophetic seers,  
why dost thou hang mute upon the willow?  
Rekindle our bosom's memories,  
and speak of times gone by!  
Mindful of the fate of Jerusalem,  
either give forth an air of sad lamentation,  
or else let the Lord imbue us  
with fortitude to bear our sufferings!*

Verdi tells us a story about an early rehearsal of *Va Pensiero*, when he first realizes the music is resonating with its listeners:

... the people have always been my best friends - from the very beginning. It was a handful of carpenters who gave me my first real assurance of success.

...  
It was after I had dragged on in poverty and disappointment for a long time at Busseto, and had been laughed at by all the publishers, and shown the door by all the impresarios. I had lost all real confidence and courage, but through sheer obstinacy, I succeeded in getting *Nabucco* [...] rehearsed at La Scala, in Milan.

The artists were singing as badly as they knew how, and the orchestra seemed to be bent only on drowning the noise of the workmen who were busy making alterations in the building. Presently the chorus began to sing, as carelessly as before, the 'Va pensiero,' but before they had got through half-a-dozen bars the theatre was as still as a church.

The men had left off their work, one by one, and there they were, sitting about on ladders and scaffolding, listening! When the number was finished they broke into the noisiest applause I have ever heard, crying "Bravo, bravo, viva il maestro!" and beating on the woodwork with their tools.

Then I knew what the future had in store for me. (Interview with Annie Vivanti, first published in London's *The Daily Graphic*, 14 January 1893; the text here is from the version reprinted in MARCELLO CONATI, *Interviews & Encounters with Verdi*, translated by Richard Stokes [Ithaca, 1984], pp. 237-238. Quoted by Roger Parker in *Arpa D'or Dei Fatidici Vati: The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s*, at pp. 36-37.)

At the end of Verdi's 81-year life, in 1901, a huge crowd gathers for his funeral procession. The people join a choir to sing "Va Pensiero," the still-popular song which reignited a musical genius' career.

In this video clip, we see a 2005 performance of *Va Pensiero* by the Metropolitan Opera. The audience, stunned by the bravura performance, is treated with an immediate encore.

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Credits:

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