

Chapter Five

Conclusions: The insidious mastery of song

*In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong*
D.H. LAWRENCE, "Piano"

*Also wendet es sich, das Echo,
Mit diesen.*
HÖLDERLIN, "Mnemosyne"

As mentioned in the Preface, it would be presumptuous to develop broad conclusions from the preceding chapters: broad conclusions would necessarily involve a thorough (and long overdue) reevaluation of Verdi's "political" status and influence during his early career. Such a reevaluation would need — more actively than I — to search for some level of interaction between music and politics beyond the merely metaphorical one usually advanced. Sufficient here is merely to register again a sense of dissatisfaction at the manner in which Verdi's early works are so thoroughly and mechanically associated with political and social upheavals.

Here, without access to such wide-ranging documentation, we are ultimately left with the curious case of «Va pensiero»; of a chorus that seems, on close investigation, to assume progressive layers of ambiguity. While it has undoubtedly become one of Verdi's most famous, most "meaningful", most idealized pieces of music, it seems, at least from the technical viewpoint essayed earlier, constantly to stress its dependence, or at least its state of symbiosis, in

relation to its companion piece in the opera. The "generic" enquiry of Chapter Three, the consideration of verse metre and the comparative look at «O Signore, dal tetto natio», seem further to confirm the strangeness of «Va pensiero». Far from grounding it in a tradition, Chapter Three encourages confirmation of its anomalous position. The chorus was, as we can see all the more clearly within the broader perspective, divorced from its context, its choral and decasillabic fullness and lack of resolution were appropriated by future generations. To put it more modishly, «Va pensiero» defines itself essentially through a series of absences. On another level, that of reception, the chorus seems to have moved fairly uneventfully through a historical period of great political tension, only to emerge later as the representative music of that period. Again, there is a sense of absence: of its retrospective significance filling the void of its contemporary obscurity. And perhaps it is precisely here that the seeming contradictions may finally be confronted and, if not be resolved, then at least assume a shape more capable of modern-day assimilation. We must turn again, briefly, to the historical context.

When, in the Autobiographical Sketch of 1879, Verdi fashioned the chorus as his artistic epiphany, and, more powerfully still, when those hundreds of thousands of Italians intoned the chorus at his funeral in 1901, the heady revolutionary atmosphere of the 1840s was long gone. Not only had the battles for Italian unity been fought and won, but a severe reaction of economic and cultural decline had ensued, and had been seen by many as a direct result of unification. Viewed in this light, the latter-day appropriation of «Va pensiero» can perhaps take on a new significance.

It was, both the musical discussion and the documentary evidence suggested, unsuited to the active world of its own period. As we saw from the *Gazzetta di Milano* and the other theatrical journals, Italians in the heat of battle did not want, did not need to deal in metaphor. They wanted theatrical caricatures of the vanquished, *La muta di Portici*, Pellico's *Le mie prigioni*: an art that portrayed their present situation directly and without equivocation. On the other hand, once removed from the glare of contemporary events, the curiously absent musical centre of «Va pensiero» loses its sense of paradox, becomes a great strength. It makes the chorus into an ideal object with which to conjure up that period of action for future generations, through which — to return to an image evoked

in the Preface — that generation could engage in a dialogue with the past. Its power, in short, was not as a piece “of” the times, but as a vehicle of nostalgia: an evocation not so much of a lost homeland as of lost times. Nostalgia is a curious, little-discussed human emotion, perhaps because, like «Va pensiero», it thrives on ambiguity, on contradictory layers of meaning. And when we come to the vessels through which nostalgia travels, a further, equally conditioning ambiguity becomes apparent: nostalgia is at its most intense when directed through an object that never existed. To put it one way, the fact that «Va pensiero» was relatively uninfected by real events made its appropriation by future generations more possible, more likely, more powerful. To put it another, the tendency of «Va pensiero» ever to look outside itself for resolution is what made it a representation not only of the achievement, but also of the ambiguous aftermath of Italy’s achievement of national unity.

We have, of course, limitless interpretative end-games in the face of an enquiry such as this. One, perhaps the most simple and poetic, is offered in aphoristic form by the quotation invoked in the title of this chapter. Its source is a brief poem by D.H. Lawrence entitled “Piano”:

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me
 Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
 A child sitting under a piano, in the bosom of the tingling strings
 And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
 Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
 To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
 And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
 With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
 Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
 Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

We can, that is, recognize the insidious mastery of song, the fact that music’s power to evoke is sometimes so intense that it can betray us into believing too uncritically what we hear coming out of history, give a false sense of immediacy to the associations we make.

And if a shadow may be cast over the poem for some by Lawrence's fear that his "manhood is cast / Down in the flood of remembrance", by that linguistic hint of the appalling political repercussions of the Risorgimento in the first half of our own century, then that shadow will be made no less menacing in a second quotation. Paul de Man's justly famous essay on Wordsworth and Hölderlin strikes an equilibrium between the claims of action and its interpretation which can hardly be improved upon, but which itself has now acquired ghostly biographical remembrances that are difficult to dispel:

Act and interpretation are [...] connected in a complex and often contradictory manner. For the interpreter of history, it is never a simple and uniform movement like the ascent of a peak or the installation of a definitive social order. Rather, it appears much more in that twilight [...] in which the coming-to-consciousness is in arrears vis-à-vis the actual act, and consequently is to be understood not as a conquest but rather as a rectification or even a reproach. The future is present in history only as the remembering of a failed project that has become a menace.¹

Rather than end there, or drag the story of «Va pensiero» remorselessly into the present day — into airline advertisements, or to present-day La Scala (where the chorus continues to have a resonant political dimension), or even to the Lega Nord's putative Padania, which wants «Va pensiero» as its national anthem — I should like instead to return to the 1840s, and to slaves singing in chains. In Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the life of... an American slave*, the author recalls moments when he and the other slaves sang on their way up to the Great House Farm. At the time, he admits that the "meaning" of the music evaded him:

I did not, when a slave, understand the meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear.

However, in the very next sentence, and from his now-achieved

¹ PAUL DE MAN, *Wordsworth and Hölderlin*, in *The rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), pp. 58-59.

authorial distance, Douglass proceeds to decode those “rude” songs with surprising specificity:

They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. [...] I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy.²

There is, I think, much to ponder in this extraordinary passage. About the power of music to bear a message, certainly; but also about how that message may change with time, borne on its way by music’s uncanny ability to make us believe — if only for a beguiling moment — that sounds rising from the human body can transcend cultural context.

² FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *Narrative of the life of ... an American slave* (1845) (New York, 1963), pp. 13-15. To my knowledge, the passage has been quoted at least twice in the recent musicological literature: once, without comment, near the close of LEO TREITLER’s, *Postmodern signs and musical studies*, in *Journal of musicology*, 13/1 (1995), pp. 3-17; and then in a reply to Treitler delivered by Gary Tomlinson at the Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, New York City, November 1995; Tomlinson’s Derridean gloss on the passage was, I might add, a little different from mine here, but there is a mingled chime.