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The Chorus's "moral effect" in Italian Opera

Abstract

Despite Italian operatic tradition had lengthily relegated the chorus to a mainly accessory and even decorative function, its presence in nineteenth-century melodrama progressively gained momentum and acquired a rather crucial import, especially during the Risorgimento. In his *Zibaldone* Giacomo Leopardi expressed his opinion about the chorus in melodrama, comparing its current ancillary position to the role and the "moral effect" it had in ancient theatre. The moral implications suggested by the poet were more precisely and firmly developed by Giuseppe Mazzini in his *Filosofia della musica* [*Philosophy of Music*], where the importance of the chorus is passionately stressed. Being aware of the centrality and communicative potential of melodrama in Italy, Mazzini charged the chorus with a mission of cultural and social renewal. This article explores these issues by examining not only famous examples taken from Gaetano Donizetti and Giuseppe Verdi but also less known works such as Giovanni Bottesini's *L'assedio di Firenze* (1856) [*The Siege of Florence*]. Based upon a novel with the same title by Francesco Domenico Guerazzi, *L'assedio di Firenze* is a rare example of an opera in which political sentiments are openly proclaimed. Indeed, Bottesini's use of the chorus appears to be particularly attuned to Mazzini's idea and proves a case in point of the "moral effect" exercised by the chorus during the great season of Italian melodrama.

Defined by Nietzsche as the *Urgrund*, the primal ground, of a representative form of Apollonian and Dionysian descent (Nietzsche 1994: 1), the chorus played a fundamental aesthetic and moral role in ancient tragedy and constituted its dramatic centre of gravity until Sophocles. With their dancing and singing in the *orchestra*, the chorus epitomized the Greek concept of music as a synthesis of all dynamic arts (Comotti 1991: 5), and provided an area specifically devoted to reflections of universal import. As the repository of ethical values and being at times involved in the action, the chorus had the *mousikà* transformed into elements that expressively connoted dramatic situations, emotions, and moods.

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In the second half of the sixteenth century the ambition to revive ancient Hellenic theatre was one of the decisive factors behind the development of the idea of melodrama. As for this new musical genre, the intermingling of drama and chorality found its fullest expression in Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607). Yet, the growth of a theatrical managerial system contributed to assign an absolutely central role to solo voices, for both aesthetic and commercial reasons, downsizing or altogether deleting other elements, such as choral interventions. In the same period in France the choral parts took on a preeminent role in the richly spectacular *tragédies en musique* of Lullian derivation, under the patronage of Louis XIV. In Italy, the chorus was completely reintegrated into serious opera only in the second half of the eighteenth century, once the French influence and Gluck's reform had led to the abandonment of the traditional Metastasian structure. Thus the last phase of Italian operatic tradition saw the chorus establish itself as an important resource, although in the early nineteenth century it was still endowed with a mainly accessory and decorative role, comparable to that of the scenery. In addition to its predominantly narrative and commenting side-role, inscribed in the dramatic frame, in Rossini's years the chorus occasionally started to perform as an acting crowd, later acquiring an extra-diegetic function or actually metamorphosing into a purely timbric component. In the following pages we will focus on these aspects by examining more or less well-known examples taken from the operatic repertoire from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century.

In conformity to a theatrical trend towards the ethnic or geographical characterization of staged events (following the contemporary fascination for ethnically or geographically characterized dramas), the chorus could be employed to boost the *couleur locale* without really influencing the unfolding of the plot: see the Muslim, Savoyard, Tartar, or Polish choruses present in many operas between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. *La Lodoiska* (Venice, 1796) by Simon Mayr, based upon a successful *pièce à sauvetage,* complies with this fashion and has the few lines sung by the chorus denounce its marginal, albeit dramaturgically functional, role. The action begins with the intervention of a group of Poles bearing flowering branches and celebrating the upcoming wedding between Boleslao and the female protagonist, who is actually in love with Lovinski:

> Scenda propizio imene,
> E in sacro laccio unisca
> La vaga Lodoiska
> All'inclito signor.
> (Gonella 1796: 9)

> [May the god of marriage benevolently descend / to tie the sacred knot / between beautiful Lodoiska / and this illustrious man.][1]

In 1.6 an aggressive chorus of Tartar soldiers is present on stage, while in 1.8, a group of Polish prisoners sing *di dentro* before being freed by Lovinski. In Act 2, two choruses soon appear on stage: the victorious Poles and the Tartars, now imprisoned. The chorus of Poles interact with other characters in 2.9, and in 2.14 sing two tercets of ten-syllable lines to celebrate the wedding of their lord with Lodoiska; they then remain on stage punctuating the conflictual *concertato* that closes the act. In the epilogue, the entrance of the Tartar soldiers, aimed at liberating the two lovers imprisoned by the evil Boleslao, does not result in an autonomous choral song and the action ends on a joyous quatrain sung by all those on stage:

> Cessin la strage, e il sangue,
> Sia l'ira ormai placata
> E torni con l'amata
> L'amante a respirar.
> (Gonella 1796: 72)

> [Cease the bloody slaughter, / May the rage be calmed / May lover and beloved / breathe in relief.]

All in all, a simple recounting of the lines assigned to the choruses – roughly forty lines in the whole libretto – suffices to assess the actual relevance of the masses in the action.

Although the use of the chorus is deemed to be a Rossinian innovation, its recurrence in the Pesarese composer's operatic production is far from being regular or consistent (Tortora 1996: 19). In Rossini's work the choral interventions especially characterize large-scale pieces. The chorus is always to be found in the introduction, where it serves, so to speak, as an icebreaker: it either plays a prologic role by giving useful information about the antecedents, or merely facilitates the scenic development. In the finale it enhances the musical and dramatic complexity and pomp, emphasizing the conflicts on stage and taking the parts of the protagonist or of a group of characters. It also quite frequently appears in multi-section forms (arias, large-scale scenes, ensembles), for instance as a group of maidservants comforting the female protagonist, who sublimates her affliction into a solo aria. Here is the opinion of an authoritative contemporary witness:

> Coi rondò va unito il coro, né perciò quelli si dicono meno esser pezzi assoli. Alcune volte il coro ne intona il proemio; altre volte, dopo una parte sentesi cantare di dentro (anche un semplice suon d'istrumenti fa lo stesso uffizio), quindi, arrivando sulla

1. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Italian quotations are by Carlo Vareschi.

> scena, da quanto annunzia, prendesi occasione di cambiare la situazione, variar lo stile musicale, porre secolui a dialogo l'attore soliloquente, e terminar col gradito secondo delle simultanee voci corali … Anche il coro canta solo, come non secondario interlocutore … Allora il suo canto è aria, che, detta da più voci, diviene suscettiva di particolare contrappunto. Né mancano esempj di duetti fra due cori distinti. (Ritorni 1841: 42-3)

> [The chorus should take part in the rondos, without belittling their soloist quality. Sometimes the chorus intones a prelude; some other times, after being heard singing off stage (this effect can also be provided by instrumental music), it enters the stage and alters the situation with an announcement, changes the musical style, and dialogues with the soloist pleasantly assisting him or her by joining voices … The chorus can also sing alone, not as a secondary character … Its song is then a multi-voiced aria, susceptible to a particular counterpoint. And there are also examples of duets between two different choruses.]

The choruses *di dentro* mentioned by Ritorni, though infrequent, allow a broadening of the spatial horizon, as is the case with the already cited intervention of the Polish prisoners in *Lodoiska*; otherwise they can perform the task of enriching a lyrical and introspective scene or of signalling the approaching of a military squad.

Introductions usually have a ternary structure: a) an opening section sung by the chorus, sometimes together with one or more secondary characters; b) a slow *cantabile* in which a main character is introduced; c) a *cabaletta*, with the return of the chorus and other characters on stage (Gossett 1970: 54-55). At the end of the overture of Rossini's *Otello* (Napoli, 1816), a cheering crowd welcomes the victorious protagonist with two quatrains of eight-syllable lines. The chorus "Viva Otello, viva il prode" ["Hooray for Otello, hooray for the hero"] is followed by a military march, which accompanies the commander's entrance, and a long recitative. After being awarded the Venetian citizenship by the Doge, fuelling Iago's and Roderigo's discontent, Otello sings a *cavatina*, "Ah sì per voi già sento" ["I already feel for you"], and the following *cabaletta*, "Deh! amor dirada il nembo" ["Pray, love, dissolve the clouds"], is interspersed by the interventions of the chorus of Venetian senators and citizens: "Non indugiar, t'affretta, / Deh! vieni a trionfar" (Berio 1816: 7) ["Hurry without delay, / Pray! join your triumph"].

At least until Rossini's successful stay in Naples (1815-22), contemporary choral pieces were generic and stylistically conventional, which made them suitable for all occasions. In spite of this, the chorus established itself as a fundamental element from the point of view of staging. In this regard in 1836 Pietro Lichtental declared that "the Chorus is one of the most beautiful ornaments of the operatic stage, and with its impressive crowds it offers the most magnificent example of union between melody and harmony, voices and instrumental music" ("il Coro è uno de' più bei ornamenti della scena lirica, ed

offre colle sue masse imponenti il complesso più magnifico dell'unione della melodia all'armonia, e delle voci all'orchestra" (Lichtental 1836: 216).

In those same years, even Giacomo Leopardi expressed his view on the use of the chorus in opera. In his non-systematic aesthetics, music is a recurring presence. Indeed, the *Zibaldone* abounds with references to music in general and to the contemporary musical scene in particular. Yet, despite his deep interest and romantic appreciation of the power of music to express an idea of infinity, Leopardi's knowledge was limited to the theatrical panorama of Recanati and the other Italian towns where he resided. In general terms, he agreed with the critical attitude which censured opera theatre because of its lack of ethical values, indifference to dramatic laws, and acquiescence to the discretion of singers and musicians, all of which were held to be detrimental to poetry. In an entry dated 7 July 1823, Leopardi gives his opinion about the presence of the chorus in melodrama, comparing its current ancillary position to the role it had in ancient theatre:

> Nelle nostre Opere serie e buffe l'effetto del coro non è cattivo. Ma esso nelle opere serie è ben lontano dal far quegli uffici, dal sostener quel personaggio, e quindi muovere quelle illusioni e far quegli effetti che faceva nelle tragedie antiche: ond'è che esso riesce forse meglio nelle opere buffe, quanto all'effetto morale, giacché muove pure all'allegria, e fa, come l'uffizio, così l'effetto che produceva nelle antiche commedie, né il muovere all'allegria ch'è pure una passione, è piccolo effetto morale. Laddove nelle opere serie esso non interessa quasi che gli occhi e gli orecchi, e niuna passione ancorché menoma né desta né pur tocca. Ma questo è pur troppo il general difetto di tutta l'Opera, e massime della seria, e nasce dal far totalmente servir le parole allo spettacolo e alla musica, e dalla confessata nullità d'esse parole, dalla qual necessariamente deriva la nullità de' personaggi, e così del coro, e quindi la mancanza d'effetto morale, ossia di passione; se non altro la molta scarsezza, rarità, languidezza, e poca durevolezza dell'uno e dell'altra. (2905-6, Leopardi 1991:1538-9)
>
> [The effect of the chorus in our serious and comic *Operas* is not bad. But in serious *operas* it is very far from performing the same functions, from preserving the same character, and hence from evoking the same illusions and from having the same effects it had in ancient tragedy. Perhaps it succeeds better therefore in *comic operas*, so far as the moral effect is concerned, since it induces gaiety, and has both the function and the effect that it had in ancient comedies. And inducing gaiety, which is also a passion, is a moral effect of no little weight. Whereas in serious *operas* the chorus is almost only of interest to the eyes and the ears, and does not rouse or touch even the slightest of passions. But this unfortunately is the general shortcoming of all *Opera*, especially of the serious kind. It is due to the total subordination of the words to the spectacle and to the music, and to the acknowledged nothingness of those words, from which necessarily derives the nothingness of the characters, and likewise of the chorus, and hence the lack of moral effect, in other words passion. Or, if nothing else, the great scarcity, rarity, feebleness, and fleeting nature of one and the other. (2905-6, Leopardi 2013: 1202)]

He could not envision that this comic tendency would soon dry up. From 1830 onwards, the operatic production would indeed mostly comprise serious

operas, with the exception of the lasting popularity of mock-serious subjects, and a fleeting comic revival during the light-hearted Fifties. While keeping in mind that the dramatic and musical function of the chorus is mainly narrative, it is also essential to point out that, in its lyric interventions, the chorus recounts, comments upon, and emphasizes the action. Thus, as Daniela Tortora has it, the chorus creates "systematic shifts in the perception of theatrical time, wholly incompatible with musical comedy" (1996: 20).

Between 1810 and 1830 the chorus underwent an interesting development. For instance in *Mosè in Egitto* [*Moses in Egypt*], a mayor success of Rossini's Neapolitan years, individual emotions fit into collective vicissitudes and, as a result, the chorus gains a more central role. Also Act 2 of Gaspare Sontini's *Agnes von Hohenstaufen* (Berlin, 1829) is informed by a pyramidal structure on the basis of two powerful concerted pieces with a wonderful chorus of religious women accompanying the wedding between the protagonist and Henry the Lion. However, Leopardi's excerpt seems to advocate more than a simple increase in the chorus's presence and dramatic relevance. The fundamental theatrical term "effetto" ["effect"] is repeatedly used in the sense of *ethos,* the peculiar quality accorded to the various *harmoniai* [scales] and above all to their *tropoi* [modes] by the theory traditionally attributed to Damon (fifth century BC). In the *poikilia* [differentiation] of musical combinations, each *ethos* has an effect, an inevitable repercussion on the human body and soul. In this respect Plato goes as far as to argue that changes in musical styles could result in dangerous alterations "in the most important *politikoi nomoi*" [civic laws] (Plato 1969: 4.424c; Wallace 2010: 86-8). Leopardi differently argued that the musical "effect" is to be connected to the "sound", the natural and primeval element that has music become the quintessential art, capable of acting directly on human sensibility: "[M]usic imitates and expresses only feeling itself, which it draws from itself" (79, Leopardi 2013: 79) ("[L]a musica non imita e non esprime che lo stesso sentimento in persona, ch'ella trae da se stessa", 79, Leopardi 1991: 98). Nietzsche maintained that, in the most advanced stage of ancient theatre, the chorus led to the *tragischer Eindruch*, a strictly aesthetic phenomenon consisting in a peak of lyrical *pathos* with a minimum of *dran* or action (Ugolini 2011: 322). Leopardi uses the word "effect" three times and with a precise meaning, linking it to the adjective "moral", and thus evoking the ethic essence of the chorus as conceived by Aristotle and echoed by Horace in his idea of a universal voice proclaiming the sacred moral laws (*Ars Poetica*, ll. 193-201). In the early nineteenth century's dramatic theory defined the chorus not only as the agent that endowed the theatre with a moral dimension, but also as an element that broke the scenic illusion by separating reflection from action, transcending the latter and speaking for all humankind: "a living wall which tragedy draws around itself in order to guard itself from the world of

actuality, and maintain for itself its own ideal ground, its poetical freedom" (Schiller 2015: 149) ("[E]ine lebendige Mauer sein, die die Tragödie um sich herumzieht, um sich von der wirklichen Welt rein abzuschließen und sich ihren idealen Boden, ihre poetische Freiheit zu bewahren", ibid.: 148). Thence the chorus derives its contradictory nature, already discussed in Chapter 18 of Aristotle's *Poetics* (1932: 1447a, 7-10): although incorporated in the action, the chorus echoes and transcends it (Zimmermann 2011: 294). Advocate of a monumental notion of chorus wholly devoid of any information regarding its members, in the entry dated 21 June 1823 Leopardi connects its presence to:

> quell'indefinito ch'è la principal cagione dello charme dell'antica poesia e bella letteratura … Il bello e il grande ha bisogno dell'indefinito, e questo indefinito non si poteva introdurre sulla scena, se non introducendovi la moltitudine. Tutto quello che vien dalla moltitudine è rispettabile, bench'ella sia composta d'individui tutti disprezzabili. … Le massime di giustizia, di virtù, di eroismo, di compassione, d'amor patrio sonavano negli antichi drammi sulle bocche del coro, cioè di una moltitudine indefinita, e spesso innominata, giacché il poeta non dichiarava in alcun modo di quali persone s'intendesse composto il suo coro. Esse erano espresse in versi lirici, questi si cantavano, ed erano accompagnati dalla musica degl'istrumenti. Tutte queste circostanze, che noi possiamo condannare quanto ci piace come contrarie alla verisimiglianza, come assurde, ecc. quale altra impressione potevano produrre, se non un'impressione vaga e indeterminata, e quindi tutta grande, tutta bella, tutta poetica? (2804-5, Leopardi 1991: 1485-6)

> [that indefiniteness which is the principal cause of the *charme* of ancient poetry and fine literature … The beautiful and the great need indefiniteness, and this indefiniteness can only be brought on to the stage by bringing on the multitude. Everything that stems from the multitude is respectable, though it is composed of wholly contemptible individuals … In the ancient dramas the maxims of justice, virtue, heroism, compassion, patriotism were spoken by the chorus, that is to say, an indefinite and often unnamed multitude, since the poet did not in any way declare which persons his chorus was supposed to consist of. These maxims were expressed in lyric verses, and the latter were sung and accompanied by musical instruments. All these circumstances, which we are at liberty to condemn as implausible, as absurd, etc., what other impression could they give save a vague and indeterminate one, and hence one that was altogether great, beautiful, poetic?] (2804-5, Leopardi 2013: 1160)

The problem of broken theatrical illusion emerges in Leopardi's words, even though it is seemingly solved by the thesis that attended the early history of opera: the implausibility of theatrical singing is the price to be paid in order to boost dramatic effectiveness, and even more to morally sublimate staged events through reflection. The aim is to fuse the real and the ideal world, expressing "the benefit to be derived from the example of such events" (2808, Leopardi 2013: 1161) ("l'utilità che si cava dall'esempio di quelli avvenimenti", 2808, Leopardi 1991: 1487).

In the opera, a genre between drama and narrative, music is the factor that primarily conveys drama. Given its peculiar interaction with theatrical

communicative and expressive mediums, both verbal and visual, it constantly violates the scenic illusion, imposing a meditation on the staged events (Dahlhaus 1981: 3). Therefore, in an operatic context, the chorus either becomes involved in the action, thus being charged with the "moral effect", or plays only a secondary, mostly decorative, role, even when extensively employed as in the French tradition. Indeed, it is neither a means of amplification of hero's sentiments and feelings, nor a "cantuccio" ["nook"] from which the poet may speak "in persona propria" (Manzoni 1989: 77) ["in his own voice"]; nor does it act as an "idealised spectator" (Schegel 1977: 49) who fixes the correct contemplative distance between the audience and the action on stage. In fact, it is the orchestra that takes on these tasks under the control of the omniscient composer-narrator.

After his early production, marked by the influence of the *grand-opéra*, Richard Wagner employed the chorus only when the action actually required it, which rarely happened because of its realistic connotations. In the *Zukunftsmusik* project, the function that historically pertained to the chorus is entrusted to the orchestra, which Wagner considered to be the highest expression of human sensibility, in that it can convey a new collective experience. The elaboration of the scenic themes and their critical interpretation are passed on to the instrumental ensemble. Furthermore, while the ancient chorus usually did not take part in the drama, the symphonic plot and its *leitmotivs* are completely combined with the action through the so-called *unendliche Melodie*, the ultimate product of the German *Durchführung* tradition. Thus, the "endless melody" clearly came to express what the poet could only consign to silence – the "unspeakable" (Wagner 1907: 338). As regards the orchestra, Wagner wrote:

> Es wird zu dem von mir gemeinten Drama in ein ähnliches Verhältinss treten, wie ungefähr es der tragische Chor der Griechen zur dramatischen Handlung einnahm. Dieser war stets gegenwärtig, vor seinen Augen legten sich die Motive der vorgehenden Handlung dar, er suchte diese Motive zu ergründen und aus ihnen sich ein Urtheil über die Handlung zu bilden. Nur war diese Theilnahme des Chores durchgehends mehr reflektirender Art, und er selbst blieb der Handlung wie ihren Motiven fremd. Das Orchester des modernen Symphonikers dagegen wird zu den Motiven der Handlung in einen so innigen Antheil treten, dass es, wie es einerseits als verkörperte Harmonie den bestimmten Ausdruck der Melodie einzig ermöglicht, andererseits die Melodie selbst im nöthigen ununterbrochenen Flusse erhält und so die Motive stets mit überzeugendster Eindringlichkeit dem Gefühle mittheilt. (Wagner 1861: 46)

> [It will enter much the same relation to the drama meant by me, as the Tragic Chorus of the Greeks to theirs. This Chorus was always in attendance; to it were bared the motives of the dramatic action going-on before its eyes; these motives it sought to penetrate, and thence to form a judgment on the action. Only, this interest of the Chorus's was more of a reflective kind, throughout; itself had neither part nor lot in action or in motives. The orchestra of the modern Symphonist, on the contrary,

> will take so intimate an interest in the motives of the plot, that whilst, as embodied harmony, it alone confers on the melody its definite expression, on the other hand it will keep the melody in the requisite unceasing flow, and thus convincingly impress those motives on the Feelings. (Wagner 1907: 338)]

Involved in the stage action, the operatic chorus completely loses the significance it had in ancient Greece. Its function is taken over by the orchestra: a continuous "but never troubling" presence which imbues each moment of the scenic action with emotion; therefore, if not strictly required as a character, the chorus becomes "superfluous and disturbing" (ibid.), as Leopardi had justly foregrounded.

The moral implications suggested by the poet are more precisely and firmly developed by Giuseppe Mazzini in his *Filosofia della musica* [*Philosophy of Music*], where the importance of the chorus is passionately stressed. Being aware of the centrality and communicative potential of melodrama in Italy, Mazzini charges the chorus with a mission of cultural and social renewal; in that, he addresses those who can understand what influence this "new art" – leading to patriotic and civil redemption – could exercise, if deeply-rooted habits and commercial reasons had not reduced it to a stereotyped entertainment for a limited and idle group of theatregoers. Relying on the idea of the theatre as a catalyst for political passions, Mazzini contrasts the term "effect" with its plural "effects" (Mazzini 1891: 10), which alludes to the various, fragmented aspects of the performance that transform opera into a sort of "mosaic" (ibid.: 11). This prevents the surfacing of a central idea, of an essential unifying connection able to summarize the ethical meaning of the staged events:

> E non pertanto la musica, sola favella comune a tutte le nazioni, unica che trasmetta esplicito un presentimento d'umanità, è chiamata certo a più alti destini che non son quelli di trastullar l'ore d'ozio a un picciol numero di scioperati: non pertanto questa musica, che oggi è sì vilmente scaduta, s'è rivelata onnipotente sugli individui e sulle moltitudini, ogni qualvolta gli uomini l'hanno adottata ispiratrice di forti fatti, angiolo de' santi pensieri; ogni qualvolta gli eletti a trattarla ricercarono in essa l'espressione la più pura, la più generale, la più simpatica d'una fede sociale. Un inno di poche battute ha creata in tempi vicino a noi la vittoria. (Mazzini 1939: 286-7)

> [Yet music, the sole language which, by being common to all nations, is explicitly prophetic of Humanity, was surely destined to a higher aim than that of amusing the listless hours of the idle few. This Music, now fallen so low, once exercised an omnipotent sway over individuals and multitudes, when it was accepted as an angel of holy thoughts, inspiring to noble deeds; when those privileged to wield his power, employed it as the most potent, purest, most universal and sympathetic expression of social faith. In times near our own, a hymn sung by a conquered few has regained for them the victory. (Mazzini 1891: 13)]

Mazzini brings the artistic tendencies of his time down to two: one concentrates on the individuals and individual thoughts and the other focuses on mankind and social thought. The "primary generating elements" (ibid.: 21) of these trends are melody and harmony, respectively. Therefore, an encounter between the melodic nature of the Italian tradition and the harmonic depth of the German one is wished for in order to create an authentically "European music" (ibid.: 49), that is, a coalescence devoted to a social mission. After underlining the importance of historical subjects ("[if musical] drama is to be put in harmony with the progress of civilisation – whether by following in its steps or by leading the way – so as to exercise a social ministry and function …", ibid.: 40), Mazzini goes on to examine the role of the chorus, recalling its function in ancient tragedy, in which it synthesised "the unity of impression produced upon the judgment and conscience of the majority" (ibid.: 43). On the contrary, the chorus in the opera, instead of being an authentic representation of the community, is censured for descending from "the people in Alfieri's tragedies, confined to the expression of a single sentiment or idea, in a single melody (often even sung in unison) by ten or twenty voices" (ibid.: 44). Far from being a well-defined musical and dramatic component, then, it seems mostly to provide some rest to the main characters or to be merely a means for expressing or amplifying the feelings and the thoughts of the protagonists:

> Or, perché il coro, individualità collettiva, non otterrebbe, come il popolo di ch'esso è interprete nato, vita propria, indipendente, spontanea? Perché, relativamente al protagonista o a' protagonisti, non costituirebbe quell'elemento di contrasto essenziale ad ogni lavoro, drammatico – relativamente a se stesso – non darebbe più sovente immagine col concertato, coll'avvicendarsi, coll'intrecciarsi di più melodie, di più frasi musicali, intersecate, combinate, armonizzate l'una con l'altra a interrogazioni, a risposte, della varietà molteplice di sensazioni, di pareri, d'affetti, e di desiderii che freme d'ordinario nelle moltitudini? (Mazzini 1939: 307)

> [Ought not, however, the Chorus – a collective individuality – to be allowed an independent and spontaneous life of its own, as surely as the People, whose natural representative it is? Ought it not, with relation to the Protagonist, to constitute that principle of contrast so essential to every dramatic work? And with relation to the collective element it is especially intended to embody, should not concerted Music be more frequently employed in the Chorus, in order, through the interchange, alternation, or co-mingling of a variety of melodies, or musical phrases, intersected, harmonised, and combined, to represent the multiple variety of sensations, opinions, affections, and desires, which ordinarily agitate the masses? (Mazzini 1891: 44-5)]

Also Lichtental, in his aforementioned *Dizionario*, shows his appreciation for the sweeping sonorities of the *concertati* (Lichtental 1836: 217), where the chorus becomes a realistic and active mass, as in the theatre of Giacomo

Meyerbeer. In his *Les Huguenots* (Paris, 1836), he introduced an antithesis between two choruses – a feature Verdi will adopt in his *Les vêpres siciliennes* and *Aida* – and achieved a perfect balance between individual events and historical context in an atmosphere of impending tragedy and "collective horror" (Della Seta 1993: 133). Yet the hopes for a regeneration of Italian music where pinned on a musician who – according to Mazzini – was for the first time able to make use of a new passionate language and instil an ethical quality into opera: Gaetano Donizetti. Donizetti had already proved these skills very clearly in *Marino Faliero* (Paris, 1835), whose passionate war song against the oppressor was much appreciated by Mazzini; or in *L'assedio di Calais* (Naples, 1836) [*The Siege of Calais*]), where the patriotic ideal is not just the prerogative of flawless heroes but of all the population that take part in the drama. The power struggles that characterize its literary source (*Le siège de Calais* by Dormont de Bolloy) give way to the choral energy expressed by the whole community, which becomes the main feature of Donizetti's rendition (Tatti 2005: 126). The heroism of six citizens, ready to sacrifice themselves in order to save the city, and the mournful participation of all the townsfolk move the English Queen who earns them King Edward's forgiveness.

Poliuto (premiered in Naples in 1848, but composed ten years before) opens with "Ancor ci asconda un velo arcano" ["Still a mysterious veil hides us"] sung by a group of Christians gathered in an underground shrine, where they are celebrating the baptism of the protagonist, newly converted to Christianity. A choral welcome song ("Plausi all'inclito Severo" ["Praise to the noble Severo"]) introduces the baritone's aria in 1.6, while in Act 2 Donizetti reaches one of the peaks of his production. "*In tuono di fanatico zelo*" ["*In a tone of fanatical zeal*"], reinforced by the *fortissimo* of the orchestra, the chorus of the priests sing in unison a hymn in praise of Jupiter, interpolated by a delicate passage sung by the female chorus. Nearco, interrogated by Severo and the priests, refuses to reveal the name of the neophyte, but Poliuto identifies himself as such, triggering the *concertato*. In the finale of the act, Callistene and the chorus reprise the tremendous initial hymn that becomes an implacable bass line on which the other voices cross each other. A balance between personal conflicts and the public sphere is maintained throughout this long scene, in which, as Ashbrook put it, Italian opera achieves a new and much larger dimension (1982: 189). Act 3 begins with the bellows of the mob heading to the circus to watch the martyrdom of the Christians. After a passionate duet in which Paolina decides to share her husband's fate, the impatient crowd intone "Alle fiere chi oltraggia gli dei" ["To the wild beasts with the impious"], setting off the finale which they then punctuate with their song. The final events regarding the protagonists are accompanied by the intertwining of the hymn

of the faithful Christians with the menacing chant of the priests, already heard in Act 2.

If Donizetti convincingly applied Mazzini's principles, it was Giuseppe Verdi who interpreted the historical spirit of his time better than any other composer, conferring upon the public sphere an "inner resounding echo" (Mila 1984: 144), and characterizing the choral ensemble as the Folk theorized by Wagner, that is, the "epitome of all those men who feel a *gemeinschaftliche Noth* [collective need]" and therefore act "irresistibly, victoriously, and right as none besides" (Wagner 1892: 75). The choruses present in Verdi's operas of the 1840s act as 'collective individualities' and take on a unique dramatic function, underlined by the composer in the stage directions.

The hope of being rescued from a miserable predicament and the homesickness evoked in choral interventions such as "Va' pensiero" and "O Signore dal tetto natio" have often been the object of a metaphorical reading, but it is worth pointing out that their political interpretation has to be ascribed to the mythopoeia following the Italian unification. In fact, nineteenth-century viewers did not perceive them as patriotic calls (Pauls 1996; Parker 1997; Toscani 2008: 29), as attested by contemporary witnesses and by the musical structure itself. Fabrizio Della Seta has recently pointed out that the task of musicology is to explain how music was able to incarnate the ideas and the values of the Italian Risorgimento by using its own specific language (2013: 38). For instance, the ten-syllable lines typical of Risorgimento patriotic hymns are occasionally matched to a characteristic up-beat start with dotted rhythms and ascending intervals, a general unison, as well as an essential harmonic progression and rhythmic military energy, all of them originating from the French revolutionary tradition (as in the *Marseilleise*, to which Mazzini refers in his *Philosophy of Music*). In particular circumstances, some opera pieces can lose their diegetic function and acquire a conative one, in so much as they can press the audience to react emotionally, or even rebelliously. If it is indeed true that in 1844 the Bandiera brothers sang the chorus "Chi per la patria muor" ["The man who dies for his country"] from Saverio Mercadante's *Caritea regina di Spagna* (1826) before they were executed, it must be assumed that certain songs had a significant circulation in isolated form, independently from the opera to which they originally belonged. In addition to the unequivocal content of the text (quatrains of alternate five-syllable lines and masculine six-syllable lines), the irresistible 'moral effect' is fulfilled by the music:

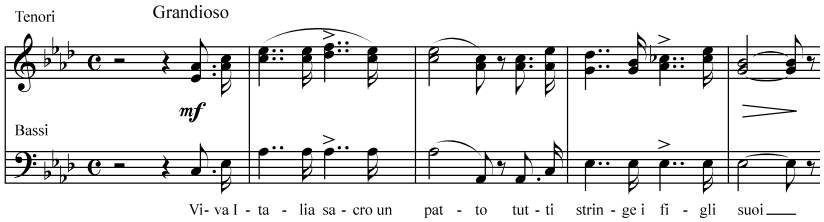
> Aspra del militar
> Bench'è la vita,
> Al lampo dell'acciar
> Gioja l'invita.
> Chi per la gloria muor

Vissuto è assai;
La fronda dell'allor
Non langue mai.
Più tosto che languir
Per lunghi affanni,
È meglio di morir
Sul fior degli anni.
Chi muore e che non dà
Di gloria un segno
Alla futura età,
Di fama è indegno.
(Pola 1826: 18-19)

[Though hard, / soldier's life / is, by the flash of metal, / called to joy. / The man who dies for his glory / has lived enough. / Laurel leaves / never wither. / Instead of languishing / in long sufferings, / it is better to die / in one's prime. / The man who dies without addressing / future ages / with a sign of glory / is unworthy of fame.]

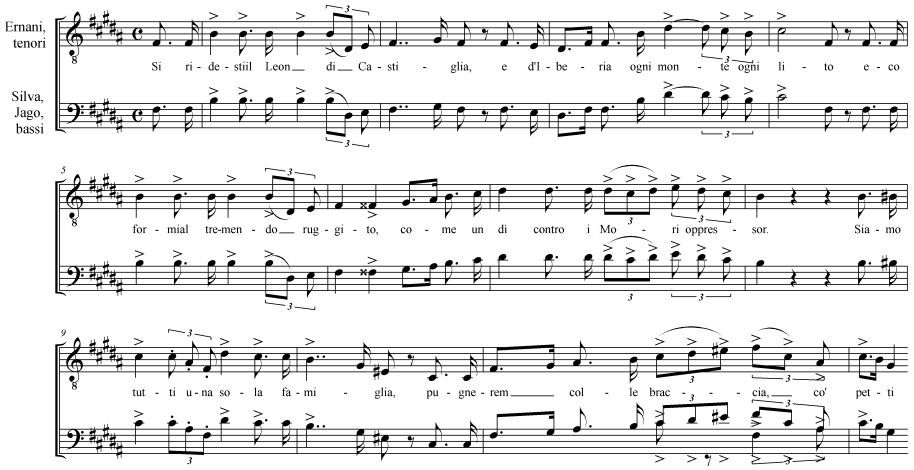
Around 1848, a political wind swept through the operatic world, in a climate of collective exaltation. Allusions to the contemporary political situation were read in significant passages taken from earlier works, such as "Guerra, Guerra!" ["To war, to war!"] from Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma.* Occasionally it was singers themselves who operated some changes and tinged otherwise unbiased passages with a patriotic hue: for example, in 1848 the "Leon di Castiglia ["Lion of Castile"] from *Ernani*'s famous chorus, became the "Leon di Caprera" ["Lion of Caprera"], and "Leon di S. Marco" ["St Mark's Lion"] alluding to Giuseppe Garibaldi and the Venetian republic respectively (Sorba 2007: 485). Yet, explicit political statements were rather unusual (Gossett 2005: 375); an exception can be found in *La battaglia di Legnano* [*The Battle of Legnano*] conceived during the brief withdrawal of the Austrian troops from Milan after the Five Days rising in 1848, and performed in Rome on 27 January 1849 during the Roman Republic led by the triumvirs Carlo Armellini, Giuseppe Mazzini, and Aurelio Saffi. *La battaglia di Legnano* was Verdi's most political opera (when revived in Parma in 1860 it significantly received the subtitle of *La sconfitta degli Austriaci* [*The defeat of the Austrians*]) and contained patriotic scenes and choruses that were not included in its literary source (*La bataille de Toulouse* by Joseph Mery, 1836). The brave Arrigo is introduced in the opening scenes as an example of vibrant heroism. Against the backdrop of "*Parte della riedificata Milano*" ["*A rebuilt part of Milan*"], the Lombard League allies sing the praises of Italy as "forte ed una" ["strong and one"], which sounds as an authentic call for action. For the first time, the Italian situation was directly and not only metaphorically connected with an idea of national dignity and unity:

Example 1



The general preoccupation with their homeland's destiny dims Rolando's joy when he meets his friend Arrigo, whom he had presumed dead (Mellace 2005: 136). With a flourish of trumpets, Milan's consuls receive the brave volunteers, prompting them to anachronistically fight the "Austro" ["Austrian"] foe. At the beginning of Act 3 the oath of the "Cavalieri della Morte" ["Knights of Death"] in St Ambrose's crypt recalls the unforgettable "Si ridesti il leon di Castiglia" ["Let the Lion of Castille rise again"] from *Ernani*, also written in ten-syllable lines (Scene and hymn 12). At Aachen, in Charlemagne crypt a group of conspirators, guided by Ernani and Silva, plots against don Carlo, who is there to be crowned emperor. He has preceded them at the crypt and has descended into the sepulchre in disguise. Ernani is chosen by lot to be Carlo's murderer and "*tutti si abbracciano e nella massima esaltazione traendo le spade*" ["everybody embrace and in frenzy draw their swords"] singing:

Example 2



In this vibrant Verdian hymn, the gestural character, typical of oath scenes, and the musical peculiarities of the choruses, resonant with distinctive Risorgimento features, such as the initial fourth interval, the warlike modulation, the repeated accents and the unison of the voices, are underscored by the incisive

orchestration that associates the shrill doubling of brass to the pizzicato string accompaniment. The allegory of the lion is reprised in the opening chorus of *L'assedio di Firenze* [*The Siege of Florence*], a forgotten work by composer Giovanni Bottesini from Crema. Based upon the novel with the same title by Francesco Domenico Guerazzi, is another rare example of an opera in which political sentiments are openly proclaimed. It has a few affinities with Verdi's *La battaglia di Legnano*: the unfolding of Act 1; the lingering sense of menace coming from the presence of a foreign oppressor (who appears on stage in the second version of *L'assedio*); the romantic intrigue involving three men (one of whom erroneously presumed dead) and the female protagonist, and, more than anything, the increased and intensified role of the chorus which, in compliance with Mazzini's intents, embodies the spirit of a united, free, and self-assured people. In 1855 Verdi staged the historical and patriotic legend of *Les vêpres siciliennes* at the Parisian Opéra which predictably attracted many Italian exiles: the opera closes with the irruption on stage of the Sicilians who, led by Procida, rush on Monfort singing "Oui, vengeance! vengeance!" ["Yes, vengeance! vengeance!"] and kill him. In the same year, having achieved international fame thanks to his amazing virtuosity, Bottesini was appointed to the post of conductor at the Théâtre des Italiens, on whose planks *L'assedio di Firenze,* composed in collaboration with poet and librettist Carlo Corghi, was staged in February 1856. To be exact, the opera was premiered on 21 February, shortly before the opening of the Congress of Paris (25 February-16 April 1856), in which Cavour succeeded for the first time in introducing the 'Italian question' as a legitimate problem of the Italian people as a national entity. As a result of the mixed reviews by the French critics, Bottesini revised the score, reducing it to 16 musical numbers and merging the last two acts, which had been the least favourably received. This amended version of *L'Assedio* was subsequently performed at La Scala opera house in September 1860, only a few days before the battle of Castelfidardo between the Sardinian army and the Papal troops.

A brief atmospheric Prelude, enlivened by the anapaestic pulses of horns and trumpets, introduces the opening scene in which the Florentines, intent on preparing their defence, sing "Ruggi, fremi, o Leone d'Etruria" ["Roar and tremble, o lion of Etruria"]. Examining the musical numbers from *L'Assedio di Firenze* in their totality, it is interesting to observe that there are as many choral songs (four) as soloes and duets, plus three ensembles for more than two voices. In this opera the use of the chorus, starting with the magnificent introductory piece, is attuned with Mazzini's outline and in this regard, it is worth focusing on the substantial alterations introduced in the second version which were aimed at enhancing the text's effectiveness:

[Parigi 1856]
Frema, frema l'etrusco Leone,
Sciolga all'aure l'irsuta sua chioma;
Ma Fiorenza, a dispetto di Roma,
Presta all'armi intonando qui sta:
Viva la Libertà!
Stretti siam da quell'orda spietata
Che qui traggi, o Signor di Lamagna;
Ma il tuo gufo dall'unghia grifagna
Altro grido qui alzar non udrà:
Viva la Libertà!
Ha Fiorenza, inumano Clemente,
Della stola le folgori a scherno;
Al fischiar d'un ingordo serpente
Qual è a darsi risposta ben sa:
Viva la Libertà!
Di Fiorenza oppressori tremate:
Minacciosa già alzata è la mano:
Vendicata dal popol sovrano
Tant'infamia, tant'onta sarà.
Viva la Libertà!
(Corghi 1860: 7-8)

[Milano 1860]
Ruggi, fremi, o Leone d'Etruria,
Sciogli all'aure la fulva tua chioma;
Ché Firenze alla perfida Roma
Questa sola risposta darà:
Viva la Libertà!
Benché stretta d'assedio dai barbari
Che Lamagna ed Iberia raduna,
Anche in mezzo all'avversa fortuna
Alto grida l'eroica città:
Viva la Libertà!
Omai scagli, o mitrato Pontefice,
Contro noi le tue folgori invano;
Fin nel covo del tuo Vaticano
Questo grido tremar ti farà:
Viva la Libertà!
Paventate, o tiranni, d'un Popolo
Che con tanto valore si desta.
Oh, per voi l'ultim'ora fia questa!
Tutta Italia con noi griderà:
Viva la Libertà!
(Corghi 1860: 5-6)

[Paris, 1856 – May the Etruscan Lion tremble with rage / and untie its hirsute mane / while Florence, careless of Rome / is here singing and ready to fight: / hooray for freedom! / We are besieged by this ruthless horde / gathered by you, German sire, / but your rapacious owl / will hear only one cry rising from here: / hooray for freedom! / Inhuman Pope Clement, Florence does not fear / the thunderbolts of your priests. / She knows how to answer / the hiss of a ravenous snake: / hooray for freedom! / Tremble with fear, oppressors of Florence, / the unforgiving hand is raised: / a free folk will take revenge / for such shame and infamy. / Hooray for freedom!]

[Milan, 1860 – Roar and tremble, o lion of Etruria, / untie your tawny mane; / for this is the only answer Florence will give / to perfidious Rome: / hooray for freedom! / Although besieged by barbarians / here gathered by Germany and Spain, / even in the face of adverse fortune / the heroic city keeps crying: / hooray for freedom! / In vain, you mitred Pope / throw your thunderbolts at us; / even in the deepest den of your Vatican / this cry will have you trembling: / hooray for freedom! / Tyrants, dread a folk / that rises with such valour. / May this hour be your last, / all of Italy will cry with us: / hooray for freedom!]

The two versions share the same rhyming scheme (ABBCc, DEEFf, etc.) and metrical structure, based on four stanzas of anapaestic ten-syllable lines (recalling both Verdi's most famous choruses from the 1840s and some of Manzoni's poems), plus a masculine six-syllable line repeating the political refrain "Viva la Libertà" ["Hooray for freedom"]. In both variants, the call for action in the first two stanzas is followed by an invective in the third one and a final admonition. Nonetheless, the most interesting and substantial changes occur at the lexical level thus endowing the text with a greater ideological import with regard to the contemporary political situation.

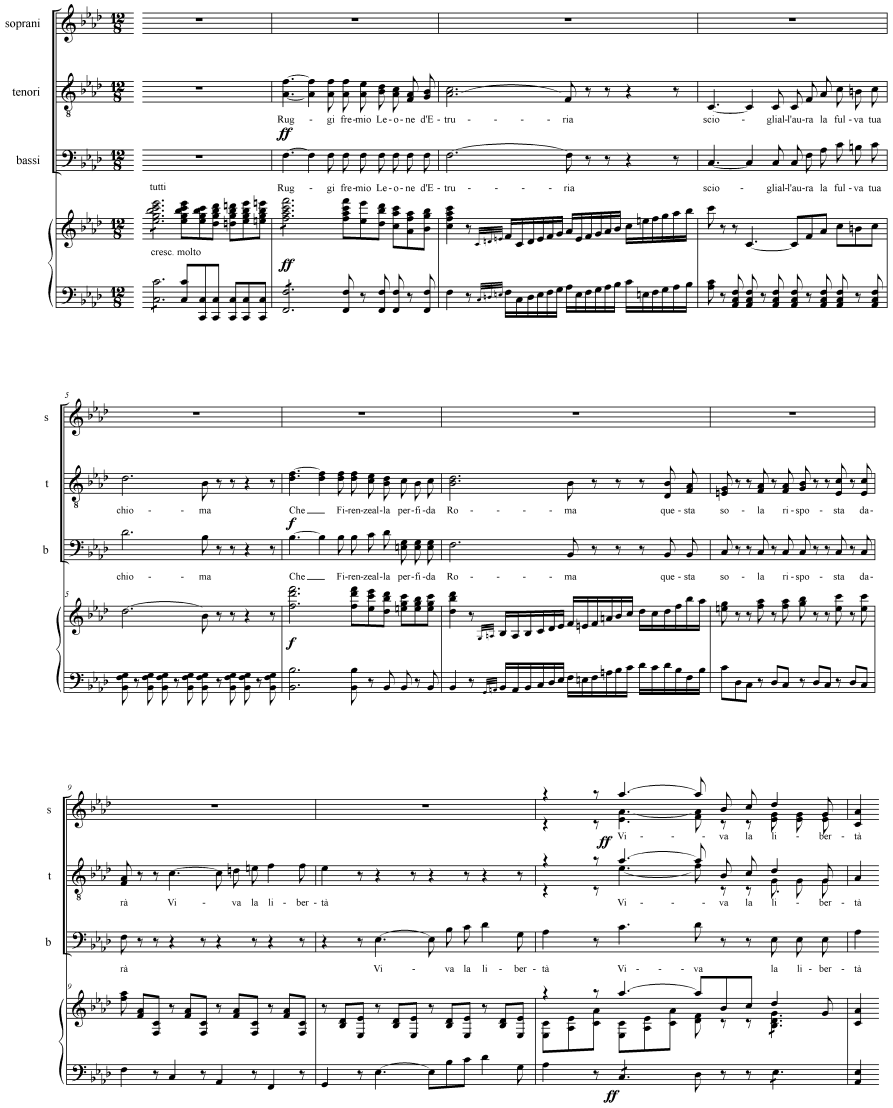
In the first line the initial repetition ("Frema, frema" ["tremble with rage"]) is substituted by the isocolon or parallelism ("Ruggi, fremi", "Roar and tremble"); the passage from the third to the second person singular, together with the alliteration, makes the appeal more direct and effective. The following prosopopeia or personification, derived from the Etruscan chimera and reminiscent of Verdi's "Lion of Castile", is reinforced by the zoological pertinence of the opening verb ("ruggi", "roar") and by the geographical reference ("d'Etruria", "of Etruria") which replaces the adjective ("etrusco", "Etruscan"). Moreover, the Latin origin of the term "fulva" ["tawny"], alluding to the colour of the lion's mane ("chioma"), enhances the splendour of the image, in comparison with the harshness of the original "irsuta" ["hirsute"], and creates an analogy with the motive of heroism and bravery evoked in the second and third stanzas. Differently from Germany, in Italy the movement for national unity resulted mostly from individual spontaneous efforts, as recounted in the initial chorus of *La battaglia di Legnano*. What is stressed here is that Italy, epitomized by Florence, is no more forced in a defensive position since, no longer dominated by foreign powers, it can proudly stand up and shine. An even more distinct shift is detectable in the third line, in which the adjective "perfida" ["perfidious"] emphasises the negative connotation of Rome as papal residence, notwithstanding the Roman republic experience. Mazzini's short-lived Republican venture had massively boosted the myth of the 'New Rome' as inseparable from the process of Italian unification, together with the rhetoric of messianic regeneration of the ancient imperial glory (Duggan 2008). Back in 1529-30, the siege of Republican Florence had marked the beginning of Spanish domination in Italy. The Emperor Charles V wanted to regain Papal favour after the sack of Rome and the attack against Clement VII Medici in 1527, and was forced to reinstate, although unenthusiastically, the Pope's family on the ducal throne of Florence. While the Parisian text directly mentions Pope Clement (l. 3), the periphrasis in the second version ("mitrato Pontefice", "mitred Pontiff") allows a topical interpretation of the invective with reference to contemporary events. As is well known, Pope Pius IX was greatly unpopular with Italian patriots for his ambiguity and cynicism. In July 1846, a few weeks after his election, he had granted an amnesty for political prisoners, causing an extraordinary wave of expectation in those who hoped to combine the enthusiasm for the national cause with religious faith in order to achieve the wider involvement of the populace; yet, in 1848, after he had sent troops in support of the Five Days rising in Milan, Pius repented of having taken sides against Catholic Austria and abandoned the alliance with the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. In 1850, when he was restored to the Papal throne after the brief spell of the Roman Republic, he repealed the Constitution issued by the Triumvirate; in 1852 he even ordered the defrocking of Father Enrico

Tazzoli, which allowed the Austrians to carry out his death sentence. A few years later, in 1859, he brutally repressed the insurrection of Perugia, sending Swiss mercenary troops to restore the rebel town to the Papal states. During the La Scala run of *L'Assedio di Firenze*, although Vittorio Emanuele agreed with Napoleon III not to invade Rome after the battle of Castelfidardo, the Pope's sovereign possessions were reduced to Lazio. The syntax and meaning of the third stanza in the second version of the chorus contribute to enhance the effectiveness of the invective. The anastrophe introduced at ll. 11-12 clarifies the image of the Pope thundering against the insurgents, and, in the following line, the original metaphor of the snake is alluded to by the word "covo" ("den"), sinisterly reverberating in the assonance with "tuo Vaticano" ("your Vatican"). Finally, the "risposta" ["answer]" of the first version becomes a "grido" ["cry"] for freedom, and, reinforced by the deictic "questo" ["this"], turns into an ominous warning to the Pope. The siege is actually evoked in the second stanza. In the Parisian version, with an intended historical shift, the "orda spietata" ["ruthless horde"] is under the command of a "Signor di Lamagna" ["Lord of Germany"], instead of whom we would expect to find Charles V; in the second version, the Grecism "barbari" ["barbarians"] is far more evocative in that it may allude to all forms of foreign oppression. The inner force sustaining the "città eroica" ["heroic city]" in its misfortunes is underlined by the enallage or substitution of a grammatical form with another ("alto", "loud" for "loudly") and is attuned with the general purpose of the whole rewriting of the chorus aimed at exalting the final and glorious stages of the Italian redemption. However, the most significant transformation occurs in the last stanza, where the original "Fiorenza" ["Florence"] is replaced by the hypotiposis, or vivid description, of "Un Popolo che con tanto valore si desta" ["A people that arises with such valour"]: the warning which in the first version is launched against Germans, Spaniards and the Vatican is now a roaring cry directed at all tyrants by "tutta Italia" ["the whole of Italy"]. And it was that same Italy whose unification had been almost accomplished at Castelfidardo while *L'Assedio* was performed at La Scala. In the second version of the chorus, the dogma of national unity and the exaltation of freedom and independence are linked together by popular will.

The musical form echoes the ternary time signature (12/8) and the general characteristics of the oath scene in Act 3 of *La battaglia di Legnano*. A strong crescendo by the whole orchestra likewise prepares the fortissimo attack by the chorus on a held note which then falls back to a descending line, impetuously counterpointed by the strings (see example 3).[2] The first two stanzas receive

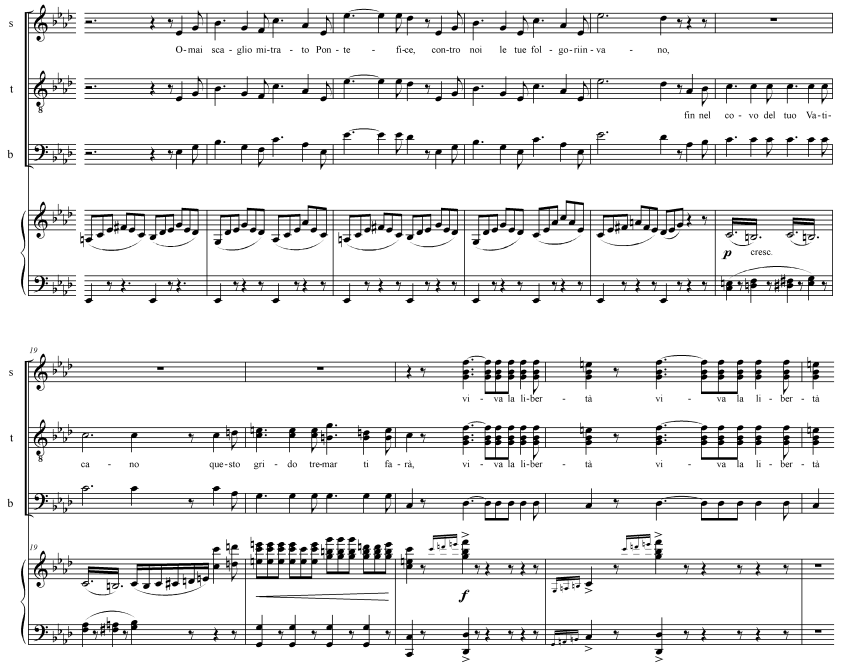
2. The reduction of the original autograph score (examples 2, 3, and 4), kept in the Archivio Ricordi in Milan, is mine.

Example 3

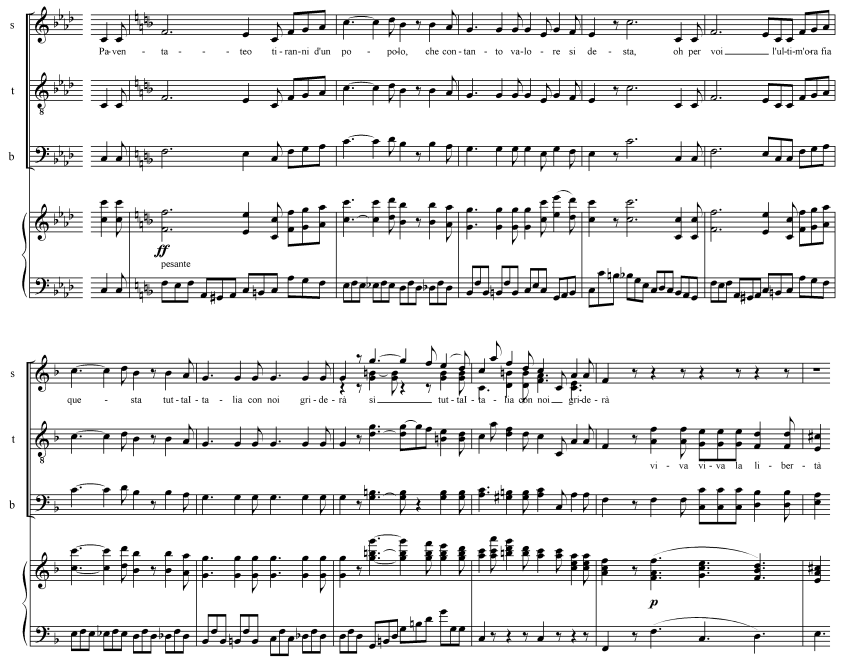


identical treatment, this time in F minor. The third modulates to E flat (see example 4) and in the fourth the fierceness of the final warning is stressed by the rising of the original key to its major mode (see example 5).

Example 4



Example 5



In the last stage of Italian opera tradition, after this genre had ceased to be the representative of the community and the standard-bearer of shared values, the chorus dropped to a secondary position. In Giacomo Puccini's protagonist-centred dramas, the mass never plays a decisive role: its function is often that to enliven and characterize the action, at least until it recuperates a fairly relevant dramatic standing in *Turandot* (Spagna 2008: 186). Therefore it is not surprising that Puccini's most famous choral intervention is the humming chorus in act 2 of *Madama Butterfly* (drawing on Verdi's naturalistic experiment in Act 3 of *Rigoletto*), which can hardly be considered a chorus – we could actually label it a 'non-chorus' – since it consists of a number of sopranos and tenors variously positioned on the stage, while the accompanying *viola d'amore* and string *pizzicato* turn into an instrumental ensemble providing an evocative backdrop to the thoughts of the female protagonist.

English translation by Carlo Vareschi

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