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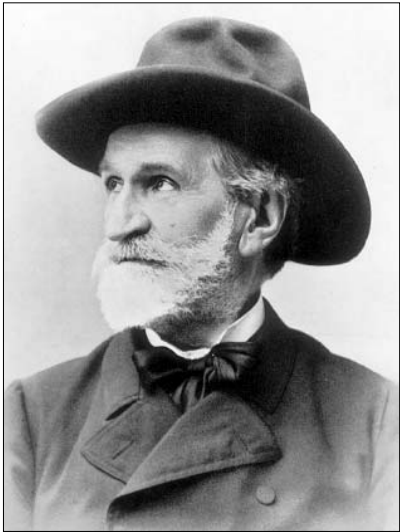


MARK ELDER

CHANDOS
OPERA IN
ENGLISH

GIUSEPPE VERDI
OTELLO

PETER MOORES FOUNDATION



Lebrecht Collection

Giuseppe Verdi

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)

Otello

Dramma lirico in four acts

Libretto by Arrigo Boito after Shakespeare, English translation by Andrew Porter

Otello, a Moor, general of the Venetian army Charles Craig *tenor*
Desdemona, Otello's wife Rosalind Plowright *soprano*
Iago, an ensign Neil Howlett *baritone*
Emilia, Iago's wife..... Shelagh Squires *mezzo-soprano*
Cassio, a platoon leader..... Bonaventura Bottone *tenor*
Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman Stuart Kale *tenor*
Lodovico, an ambassador of the Venetian Republic Sean Rea *bass*
Montano, Otello's predecessor as Governor of Cyprus Malcolm Rivers *baritone*
Herald Gordon Traynor *baritone*

English National Opera Orchestra and Chorus
Mark Elder

COMPACT DISC ONE

Act I

Scene 1

[1]	'See, the sail there!'	4:22	[p. 84]
	<i>Chorus, Montano, Cassio, Iago, Roderigo</i>		
[2]	'Oh rejoice now!'	2:17	[p. 85]
	<i>Otello, Chorus</i>		
[3]	'Roderigo, speak up'	2:45	[p. 86]
	<i>Iago, Roderigo</i>		
[4]	'Flame of rejoicing!'	2:23	[p. 87]
	<i>Chorus</i>		
[5]	'Roderigo, drink up!'	1:36	[p. 87]
	<i>Iago, Cassio, Chorus</i>		
[6]	Brindisi: 'Good comrades, brave and true'	3:47	[p. 88]
	<i>Iago, Cassio, Chorus, Roderigo</i>		
[7]	'Captain Cassio, the guard awaits your orders'	1:15	[p. 89]
	<i>Montano, Cassio, Iago, Chorus</i>		

Scene 2

[8]	'Your swords cast before me!'	3:07	[p. 91]
	<i>Otello, Iago, Cassio, Montano</i>		

Scene 3

[9]	'Now in the silent darkness'	2:30	[p. 91]
	<i>Otello, Desdemona</i>		
[10]	'Once when you told me of your life in exile'	7:33	[p. 92]
	<i>Desdemona, Otello</i>		

Act II

Scene 1

[11]	'Don't give up hope, but trust in me'	2:42	[p. 93]
	<i>Iago, Cassio</i>		

Scene 2

[12]	'Take it; take the path to your ruin'	0:32	[p. 94]
[13]	'Yes, I believe in a God who has created me'	4:25	[p. 94]
[14]	'There she is... Cassio... your chance...'	1:23	[p. 94]
	<i>Iago</i>		

Scene 3

[15]	'How distressing...'	2:52	[p. 95]
[16]	'Beware, O my lord, beware of jealousy'	2:17	[p. 96]
	<i>Iago, Otello</i>		
[17]	'At your glances, flame in our hearts'	4:01	[p. 96]
	<i>Chorus, Desdemona, Otello, Iago</i>		

Scene 4

[18]	'I come from someone who has felt your anger'	2:22	[p. 98]
	<i>Desdemona, Otello</i>		
[19]	'Grant me, oh grant me sweet words of pardon'	2:55	[p. 98]
	<i>Desdemona, Otello, Iago, Emilia</i>		

	Time	Page
Scene 5		
[20] 'Desdemona guilty!'	1:41	[p. 100]
[21] 'Now and forever farewell'	2:11	[p. 100]
[22] 'By all creation! Can I believe in Desdemona?'	1:24	[p. 101]
<i>Otello, Iago</i>		
[23] 'Darkness had fallen, Cassio was sleeping...'	4:37	[p. 101]
<i>Iago, Otello</i>		
[24] 'See me swear, you heavens above me!'	3:01	[p. 102]
<i>Otello, Iago</i>		

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COMPACT DISC TWO

Act III

Scene 1

[1] 'I bring word that the watchman at the harbour'	2:54	[p. 103]
<i>Herald, Otello, Iago</i>		

Scene 2

[2] 'God give you joy, Otello'	3:12	[p. 103]
[3] 'You are trying to tease me'	6:59	[p. 104]
<i>Desdemona, Otello</i>		

Scene 3

[4] 'God! Had it pleased you to try me with affliction'	4:22	[p. 106]
<i>Otello</i>		

	Time	Page
Scene 4		
'Ah! Damned for ever!'		
<i>Otello, Iago</i>		
Scene 5		
[5] 'Come now; the hall's deserted'	3:52	[p. 107]
<i>Iago, Cassio, Otello</i>		
[6] 'This is a cobweb, men are flies'	1:56	[p. 109]
<i>Iago, Cassio</i>		
Scene 6		
[7] 'How shall I take her life?'	1:14	[p. 110]
<i>Otello, Iago, Chorus</i>		
Scene 7		
[8] 'Hail him! All hail him!'	3:43	[p. 111]
<i>Chorus, Lodovico, Otello, Desdemona, Emilia, Iago</i>		
Scene 8		
[9] 'All hear me! The Doge...'	1:49	[p. 112]
<i>Otello, Roderigo, Iago, Cassio, Lodovico</i>		
[10] 'I lie here! Yes: I lie in the dust here...'	3:40	[p. 113]
<i>Desdemona, Emilia, Roderigo, Cassio, Lodovico, Chorus, Iago, Otello</i>		
[11] 'All in this day of glory rejoice'	1:56	[p. 115]
<i>Iago, Chorus, Otello, Lodovico, Desdemona</i>		

	Time	Page
Scene 9		
[12] 'But who can flee himself!' <i>Otello, Iago, Chorus</i>	1:53	[p. 116]
Act IV		
Scene 1		
[13] 'Did he seem calmer?'	4:56	[p. 116]
[14] "'The poor soul sat sighing beneath a willow...'" <i>Desdemona, Emilia</i>	7:05	[p. 117]
Scene 2		
[15] 'Ave Maria, mother of mercy' <i>Desdemona</i>	5:01	[p. 117]
Scene 3		
[16] 'Who's there?... Otello?' <i>Desdemona, Otello</i>	6:23	[p. 118]
[17] 'Calm and cold as the tomb' <i>Otello, Emilia, Desdemona</i>	2:00	[p. 120]
Scene 4		
[18] 'Who's shouting! Oh God! Ah no!' <i>Emilia, Iago, Otello, Cassio, Montano, Lodovico</i>	1:30	[p. 121]
[19] 'Do not fear me' <i>Otello, Cassio, Chorus</i>	5:17	[p. 122]

TT 69:54



Charles Craig
as Otello

Giuseppe Verdi: *Otello*

Note: For convenience, in this article Othello refers to Shakespeare's play, Otello to Verdi's opera. By analogy, references to the title will be made thus: *Othello* (Shakespeare), *Otello* (Verdi).

Otello: Drama and Music

After some thirty years of hard work (he called it slavery) serving the conventions and audiences of Italian opera, Verdi retired. He was financially secure and preferred farming and philanthropy to the heart-breaking struggle of operatic production. How Verdi was cajoled by friends and his crafty publisher Giulio Ricordi into overcoming his distrust of Arrigo Boito; how they collaborated on *Otello* and *Falstaff* (as well as the revision of *Simon Boccanegra*; and how Boito became a close friend, then one of the few people whom Verdi trusted and finally a surrogate son who was at the composer's bedside when Verdi died; has been delicately chronicled by Frank Walker in *The Man Verdi*. Their operatic achievement has been richly praised and, in truth, *Otello* rivals Shakespeare in passion and tenderness. Moreover, where Shakespeare (in

order to make Desdemona's pleas for Cassio seem more credible) is forced to spread his play, the opera, by using a contrast of musical styles, achieves a similar effect with more force and compression than its model.

The first act of Shakespeare's *Othello* is set in Venice and deals with the love of Desdemona for the Moorish general Othello. Their secret marriage infuriates her father; a court action follows and reveals that their love is true. The irate father is somewhat placated and Othello is ordered as Governor to Cyprus to defend the Venetian colony against the attacking Turks. Boito and Verdi abandon this act (thus shortening a very long play and allowing time for music), but keep its function: the establishment of the personality and relationship of the chief characters. The operatic **First Act** is constructed of a string of traditional operatic numbers (storm, victory hymn, fireside chorus, drinking-song, love duet) but, less conventionally, these are closely linked both by action which continues during and between the numbers, and by an unbroken musical fabric.

There is no overture – not even a prelude.

An horrific crash raises the curtain and explodes a raging storm upon the stage. The effect is chaotic: figures heard dashing to and fro in the dark and rain are thrown into visible relief by flashes of lightning, whilst thunder is punctuated by cannon-shots signalling out to sea (all these scenic elements are precisely orchestrated by Verdi and meticulously positioned in the score). Otello's ship is briefly sighted. For a moment it seems that it will sink and the excited spectators counterpoint the fractured turmoil with a great hymn to heaven: 'With gestures of fright and supplication, facing towards the bastion', command the stage instructions. Nowhere in Italian opera had such a powerful and exactly orchestrated storm been heard. Storms there were in plenty. They were designed to suspend the action, to increase tension and give the orchestra a brief moment of glory (a splendid example can be found towards the end of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*), but none broke so viciously nor were any driven so furiously – and none injected character and action so potently as this.

Just after the crowd's appeal for help we meet the first of the three protagonists – and Iago instantly shows his malevolence: 'E infranto l'artimon!... L'alvo frenetico del

mar sia la sua tomba!') (lit.) 'The mainsail's split in two!... Let angry breakers smash the ship and drown her general!'. No sooner uttered than his evil wish is thwarted: 'She's safe now!' cry the Cypriots and a few moments later Otello enters. There is no more striking an entry for tenor in opera – nor a more difficult one, for Otello must run onto the stage and launch a ringing, heroic line (reaching high A) without even one word of recitative to help him. In only three lines of verse Otello unequivocally establishes his stature as a commander and leader – the Cypriots respond instantly with a joyous chorus 'Evviva Otello'. Although Otello's opening words elicit such happiness in his subjects, his command that they should rejoice because the Turkish enemy is defeated will ring with deep irony as the work grows. The happy chorus ends and the storm subsides. As the chorus comment on this ('Si calma la bufera' 'A calm succeeds the storm now' – this too will echo ironically), we sense a wonderful relaxation of tension – Verdi achieves this by releasing a disturbingly discordant low pedal-point on three adjacent semitones (C–C sharp–D) which an organ had held from the very opening of the work.

In this easier atmosphere Iago turns to

Roderigo, a young Venetian hopelessly in love with Desdemona, and encourages his passion, assuring him that Desdemona will soon tire of her husband. Iago also confesses that he hates Cassio for being promoted above him and that he hates Otello for making that promotion – and ends one of his unctuous phrases with the rolling trill which will mark many of his most characteristic utterances. The two move off upstage (and out of earshot) whilst the Cypriots light a bonfire and start to sing ('Fuoco di gioia' 'Flame of rejoicing') in praise of fire. This is another cliché of Italian opera, and Verdi himself described it (in a letter to Giulio Ricordi) as 'that wretched bonfire scene'. Despite this off-hand dismissal of the chorus, its swift, light scoring is a delight and its function in the act is essential since it forms an integral part of a carefully graded transition from the explosive opening to the serene final duet. As both fire and chorus die down, Roderigo and Iago join Cassio, the Captain of the Guard. Iago invites his companions to drink and although Cassio at first refuses (having drunk already) he finally capitulates in order to toast Otello and Desdemona. What ensues is a wonderful example of Verdi's genius for transforming the old into the new. Cassio praises the beauty and goodness of

Desdemona – words which Iago uses to convince Roderigo that he has a rival – and then (prefaced by a sparkling orchestral introduction) Iago launches the 'Brindisi'. First he addresses Cassio, who replies in lines which complement Iago's both poetically and musically. The pattern is completed when Iago sings the refrain (complete with his trill and a snaking chromatic scale) to be echoed by the chorus. A brief aside to Roderigo and the pattern is repeated: the same music but with the orchestra enriched by trills. The same aside ('Un altro sorso e brillo egli è.' 'One more glass and he'll be drunk') is followed by the third verse. The accompaniment is further enhanced – and so is the drama, for instead of the conventional completion of the pattern, Cassio, now very drunk, misses his cue and enters too soon. Instead of the expected refrain, the chorus laughs at the drunkard whilst Iago urges Roderigo to force a quarrel with Cassio, who staggers about and soon is brawling. Whilst Roderigo (at Iago's command) sounds the alarm Montano (Otello's predecessor as Governor) intervenes and is wounded. The music becomes frantic; Otello enters (*Abbasso le spade!* 'Your swords cast before me!'), and his recitative (strings with occasional, violent punctuation by the

wind) calms the chaos. When Otello demands to know how the quarrel arose, Iago disingenuously implies that Cassio is to blame. Disturbed by the noise, Desdemona enters. Otello angrily dismisses Cassio from his post. He then gives brief orders which restore the peace and he and Desdemona are left alone on stage.

Introduced by a muted solo cello with the other cellos divided, the superb love duet begins. To words deftly woven from Shakespeare's Acts I and II this gentle, tender, yearning and passionate duet captivates us by the sheer beauty of its sound – it also fully establishes the quality and depth of the relationship between Otello and Desdemona. The culmination is the sensually lovely passage in which Otello thrice begs a kiss – we shall be brought back to this moment twice during the final act: it is on these kisses that the tragedy will hinge. Their recollection unifies the work and will achieve a special significance at the close of the opera. For the moment, with shimmering strings, harp and wind, and a final echo of the duet's opening phrases, the duet completes the gigantic *decrescendo* which Verdi has constructed to occupy the whole act.

A dialogue between Cassio and Iago begins the **Second Act**. The richly developed

orchestral introduction is based on a motif associated with Iago – at first fierce, later suave and charming, it is varied to suit his mood during this scene. Having suggested that the disconsolate Cassio ask Desdemona to intercede with Otello for his reinstatement, Iago bids his dupe depart ('vanne'), he then repeats this 'vanne' in a much less friendly tone and to a vicious unison outburst in the orchestra he begins his satanic Creed. For this Boito expanded the merest hint in Shakespeare (where Iago, having advised Cassio to put his case to Desdemona, calls on the 'Divinity of Hell' while planning his next stratagem) into a full-blooded, nihilistic declaration of evil. God is cruel; Man, created in God's image is evil – a puppet of Fate. After the mockery of life comes death – and then? (*pp legato*). Nothing. Heaven is an ancient, idle tale – complete with the full brass section braying derisive laughter. In Verdi's setting (riddled with trills, using a very wide dynamic range from *ppp* to *ff* and mostly declamatory vocal delivery) this electrifying piece displays an Iago far more positively evil than he is in Shakespeare, where his motivation rests on rumour and self-indoctrination, not on belief. The charm with which he continues his plot is chilling. While Cassio approaches Desdemona, Iago drops

casual words of suspicion which are overheard by Otello. He warns Otello to beware of jealousy – poison is planted in four smooth phrases.

In its early stages Verdi had favoured calling the opera *Iago*. In a letter to his friend, the Neapolitan painter Domenico Morelli, he disagreed with the latter's view of Iago as a small, malicious figure and went on to reveal his own view of how Iago should be portrayed:

...if I were an actor and had to play Iago, I would rather have a long, thin figure, thin lips, small eyes set close to the nose, like a monkey's, with broad, receding brow and the head developed behind; and an absent nonchalant manner, indifferent to everything, witty, speaking good and evil almost lightheartedly and having an air of indifference to what he says so that, if someone were to reproach him: 'What you say is vile!' he could answer: 'Really? I didn't think so... we'll say no more about it!'

A figure like this can deceive everyone, even – up to a point – his wife. A small, malicious figure arouses everyone's suspicion and deceives nobody! *Amen*.

In the distance Cassio has left Desdemona surrounded by Cypriots bringing gifts of flowers and fruit. The musical idiom now changes and at first seems strange. Some critics

have dismissed this scene as overlong and dramatically superfluous. On the contrary, with its magically simple addition of mandolin, guitar and small bag-pipes to the orchestral accompaniment, it shows the simple beauty of Desdemona through the eyes of others, and its length is essential if the subsequent action is to prove credible. Desdemona's gracious qualities radiate as she echoes the greetings in soaring phrases ('Splendide il cielo' 'Heaven is smiling'): Otello is quite overcome and even Iago acknowledges her beauty, as he promises to destroy it. His opportunity comes all too soon. Desdemona approaches Otello and gently pleads Cassio's case. Angrily he rejects this and casts away the handkerchief she proffers to his feigned headache. Their exchange grows into a masterly quartet as Iago and his wife Emilia, Desdemona's maid, join the estranged couple. Iago snatches the handkerchief from Emilia and orders her silence – from it he will fabricate his evidence for the tragedy. The refinement of this quartet is extraordinary: the voices blend and exchange grouping subtly whilst the accompaniment both supports the voices and disturbs their languid lines with varied, quietly brittle figuration. Although Desdemona and Emilia leave, this

accompaniment continues as Otello, emotionally exhausted, drops into a chair.

Savouring the equivalent of Shakespeare's
...I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin.
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ...

Iago tucks the kerchief into his doublet. When he approaches Otello, the latter explodes in fury. So violent is his recitative ('Tu? Indietro! fuggi!' 'You? Be careful! leave me!') that it overflows (rather than leads) into the aria in which his spirit breaks. Despite its marching pulse and martial tone, snaking triplets slither its squareness away and invade Otello's vocal line. When Otello comes to a climax on a high B flat and Iago bids him peace, the strings (*ppp molto staccato e tremolo*) are whipping continuous triplets as he demands proof, visual proof. He is so overwrought that he seizes Iago by the throat.

With much show of reluctance, Iago makes sure that his poison runs fatally deep: once again his most sensual voice he reports a dream in which Cassio described his love for Desdemona and cursed the fate that gave her to the Moor. Flutes and oboe very quietly join the strings as Iago 'quotes' Cassio's words on a high repeated C which rises chromatically to

D ('Cauti vegliamo' 'We must be careful') and then (chromatically!) slithers down an octave. His further 'quotation' (now darkened by clarinets, bassoon and horns) is delivered in a hollow, gloomy voice – despite the *dolcissimo* marking the 6/8 metre is shaken by gentle stresses on its weakest beats and the dream dissolves. The wondrous beauty of this narration, combined with the dark falsity of its content breaks Otello completely: his response ('Oh! mostruosa colpa' 'Now I am sure she's guilty!') is softly spoken – stunned, he contemplates rather than condemns. When Iago offers him the proof of the handkerchief (which was Otello's first love-offering to Desdemona) 'seen' in Cassio's hand, violence surges back into Otello's voice (*ff*: 'Ah! mille vite gli donasse Iddio!' 'Ah! Would that God had given him twenty thousand lives!') and triplet groups once more seize the accompaniment until Otello cuts it with his three insane cries ('Ah! sangue! sangue! sangue!' 'Ah! vengeance, vengeance, vengeance!'). Falling to his knees he swears vengeance to Heaven. His part begins on a monotone richly embroidered by wind. Iago prevents him from rising, and also kneels and swears. Only when they sing together (bringing the act to an heroic close) do we realise that it is Iago who

has the melody – he quite literally ‘calls the tune’ whilst Otello accompanies the vocal line contrapuntally.

The most intricate counterpoint of the score opens **Act III** mysteriously and Verdi specifically recalls both Iago and jealousy. The music achieves a climax and subsides. After the herald’s announcement of the Venetian ambassadors, Otello’s single word, ‘Continue’, is thus directed at both Iago and the jealousy within his brooding mind. This act will see Otello’s tortured doubt become (seeming) fact, for Iago undertakes to bring Cassio and provoke him into revealing his guilt. Just before Iago leaves he infuriates his victim with an insinuating ‘the handkerchief’.

Desdemona’s entry pours lyrical beauty on the scene and throughout their exchange her affection contrasts with Otello’s tense courtesy. She again pleads for Cassio and he demands the handkerchief repeatedly in ever-rising phrases. With dangerous insensitivity, she tries to return the conversation to Cassio. Abruptly Otello loses his self-control and challenges her to swear her innocence. Her protest of loyalty (expressed with the deepest feeling) infuriates him. Suddenly (as Verdi’s directions instruct) he changes from rage to an icy irony which is far more terrifying. Citing her own music he

escorts her to the door where he brutally insults her as that ‘vile, filthy harlot who’s the wife of Otello’, and ejects her from the room. Now utterly broken, he starts the opera’s most painful aria on a brooding monotone. (Note how often the arias of this opera start on a monotone – and how much more powerfully expressive they are than the traditional *bel canto* lines.) Meanwhile the orchestra doggedly pursues a small melodic figure through one harmonic and contrapuntal twist after another. With each change it gives new psychological power to the portrayal of Otello’s saturated misery and hopeless efforts to escape his torment. This number is perhaps Verdi’s greatest tragic achievement – nowhere is he so Wagnerian in the speaking power of the orchestra – and nowhere is he so profoundly Verdi, for, just at the right moment, the voice begins to rise and gradually launches on a slow, lyrical line as Otello sings of the eclipse of his sun, of the smile that had been his life’s greatest joy. Just when he curses his fate and declares that after proof there will be death, Iago returns: Cassio is here. The speed of action is so great that Otello’s line continues almost untouched and leads to a brief exchange of words after which Otello hides to listen and observe.

During the ensuing scene Iago talks to Cassio of Bianca (the latter’s mistress). Their talk is somewhat ribald and rather jovial. Otello – now in, now out of earshot – naturally thinks they refer to Desdemona and when the puzzled Cassio shows Iago the mysterious handkerchief he found in his rooms Iago waves it purposefully about: Otello sees it and his ‘proof’ is complete. The music Verdi writes here is widely varied and unprecedented in its delicacy. This is the kind of texture which pervades his last opera *Falstaff* (written five years after *Otello*). Now a more formal tone intrudes as a solo trumpet rings out – others answer and the cannon shot announces the arrival of the embassy. Iago hustles Cassio away and whilst Cypriots call welcome to the Venetian ambassadors, Otello, at Iago’s suggestion, decides to strangle Desdemona. Iago undertakes to despatch Cassio, and Otello promotes him to the rank of Captain.

The grand ceremonial scene which follows has all the brilliance of the *auto-da-fé* in *Don Carlos* or the Triumph Scene in *Aida*. (It is interesting that when Verdi prepared Otello for the Paris production of 1894 it was here that he added the ballet music, as required by French operatic convention.

Whilst dramatically superfluous, it parallels the treatment in *Aida* and has some scintillating music – and the six bars of *Invocation to Allah* have great dramatic strength.) Otello receives orders which recall him to Venice – Cassio is to succeed him as Governor of Cyprus! Goaded beyond endurance when he hears Desdemona tell Iago that she hopes to see Cassio and Otello reconciled, Otello publicly insults and to the horror of the onlookers strikes her (‘A terra!... e piangi!...’ ‘So lie there! And weep there!’). Desdemona’s exquisite lament blossoms into a vast concerted number. This is static in its effect, but its size and brightness of scoring form a vivid foil against the dark-scored colouring of the final act. Also, within the number Iago eggs Otello on to vengeance and convinces Roderigo that he must kill Cassio or lose all hope of Desdemona. At a pause in the ensemble Otello turns on the crowd and commands them away. When Desdemona tries to comfort him, he curses her and collapses in a fit. Whilst Iago gloats over his triumph, the receding crowd praise Otello and the Lion of Venice. Iago (Verdi directs: ‘with a gesture of gloating triumph’) points at the prostrate body of Otello and sneers ‘Ecco il Leone!’ (‘There lies your Lion!’). With a last, ironic shout from

the crowd of 'Long live Otello!', the curtain falls. Verdi substantially revised this finale for the first Paris performances (1894 – as heard on this recording) in order to highlight Iago's words, which, despite his and the performers' efforts had not been sufficiently audible for him in the original score.

After the twisting cross-currents; swift action and public spectacle of the preceding acts, the **Fourth Act** simple in content: its whole action rests on the symmetry of the two deaths. The tone is dark and private. Wistfully and softly (in a dark G sharp minor) a cor anglais tries to lift a melodic phrase – it sinks away. Later the phrase will acquire words as Desdemona sings the Willow Song, but now it is punctuated by flutes and is answered by hollow sounding clarinets. Treated to thirty bars of chromatic and contrapuntal stretching, it seems an age before the curtain rises to reveal Emilia helping Desdemona in her preparation for bed. Desdemona's thoughts turn obsessively to death and a song which her mother's maid used to sing will not leave her mind ('Mia madre aveva una povera ancella' 'My mother once had a poor little servant'). Plangently accompanied by the cor anglais, she sings this song of the willow over and over again. The sense of circular repetition is

oppressive but not monotonous because Verdi is careful to vary it with such touches as the portrayal of the gentle flight of birds ('Scendean l'augelli a vol dai rami cupi' 'From branches high above sweet birds came flying') or the sudden, frightening slap of a window in the wind. To heavy, sullen chords Desdemona bids her maid goodnight then, momentarily panic-stricken, she embraces Emilia and says goodbye. The earlier figure snakes back disturbingly. Its chromatic undulation shifts to a more restful A flat major as Desdemona kneels before an icon of the Virgin Mary and says her prayer. The text of this *Ave Maria* is the final facet in the operatic portrayal of her personality. Her supplication grows to fervour, and then subsides before she goes to bed and sleep.

The dark orchestral colouring now darkens further as Otello enters the room. Only the double-bass section of the orchestra is used – and all except the leader of the section are muted. Otello kisses her three times. Almost before the shock of recollection grasps this huge sweeping reference backwards to the Act I duet it dissolves (deprived of its cadence) as Desdemona awakes. Otello suffocates his wife. Emilia gains entrance only to hear her dying mistress claim suicide to protect Otello:

'And tell my Lord I never wronged him... in death I love him... Farewell...' Furiously Otello accuses her of lying and himself admits the blame: 'Oh, she's a liar! I have killed her'.

Emilia's cries bring others on the scene – only to reveal Iago's treachery and Otello's gullibility. Lodovico disarms the Moor. Otello quietly bids those present not to fear him: 'Life's weary journey has reached its end. Oh! Glory! Otello's done'. This replaces the miraculous nineteen lines in Shakespeare ('Soft you, a word or two before you go') in which Othello reviews his position as his own accuser, his own defending counsel, judge and executioner. In heart-rending lines (which return to an earlier passage in the play) he parts from his innocent, dead wife and stabs himself with a secreted dagger. On the third kiss Otello dies (Verdi sets the last syllable beneath a rest: no pitched note, merely the expiring sound of speech) and this time the cadence (and the opera) is complete.

The full tragic affect of this ending devolves from much more than its immediate musical and dramatic substance. Much has been written of Verdi's re-use of the music of the love duet and its effect here is precisely tragic since it locates Otello's *hubris* (his fatal pride) both at the moment of his greatest fulfilment

(his love for Desdemona) and his destruction. Its overwhelming force cannot simply be explained by Verdi's use of a recollection theme (a common-place effect of Italian opera and of Verdi's own work, for instance in *The Force of Destiny* or *Aida*). Nor does it stem from the simple intensity Verdi injects into it (it is less simple that it seems and is further complicated by his other use of the same device at the start of Act III). By returning to Act I at this moment of tragic completion Verdi imposes a cyclic power onto the whole and forces us to re-examine the beginning in the light of the end. Why should he do this? The answer is both subtle and Shakespearean.

Shakespeare frequently equates particular images with critical dramatic motifs. In *Othello* Iago is equated with the Turk, and warfare (Othello's occupation) with the internal battle which will destroy him. Shakespeare first plays upon these motifs in Act II, Scene 1: *A sea port in Cyprus. An open place near the quay*. It took a good critic nearly forty pages to explore the implications of this scene (Harold G. Goddard: *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, The University of Chicago Press, 1951). Sagaciously Professor Goddard called it the 'Sixth Act of *Othello*' and described its 'silent music': that surface of activity which

reveals its metaphysical core only after the tragedy is done. Verdi goes straight to this violent heart of darkness (the storm (*not* passing but to come) brings Otello who commands: 'Rejoice! The Turk's pride is buried in the sea; ours and heaven's is the glory! After our arms the storm destroyed him.' Not so, said Shakespeare; and even more directly Verdi says the same: the storm is only beginning and that 'Turk' is neither buried nor destroyed. This is the structural dynamo which drives the tragedy – hence the reason Verdi writes so huge an opening storm. This has nothing in common with those pretty orchestral parentheses which litter the operatic repertoire. By the time it seems to have died down (that huge act-lasting '*decrecendo*') we know the people of a tragedy which only then (in those three kisses) begins. A later poet was to say (himself quoting the motto of a tragic Queen) – '*In my beginning is my end*'; it is time for the curtain to go up on Verdi's greatest drama.

Benedict Sarnaker

Born in 1919, **Charles Craig**'s ambition was always to sing, but family needs meant that he took other work before joining the army at the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1947

he joined the Covent Garden Opera chorus. He made his debut in London concerts with Sir Thomas Beecham in 1952, and the following year joined the Carl Rosa Opera as a principal tenor, making his debut as Rodolfo (*La bohème*); he also sang the roles of Des Grieux (Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*) and the title role in the British premiere of Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini*. He went to Sadler's Wells Opera in 1956 and there sang roles including Samson, Andrea Chénier and the Prince in the first British production of Dvořák's *Rusalka*. He first sang at Covent Garden as a principal in 1959 as Pinkerton (*Madama Butterfly*), and other roles included Pollione (*Norma*) and Des Grieux. He was a guest at many of the major opera houses in Europe and North and South America, and was in particular demand as an interpreter of Otello, which he performed in Berlin, at La Scala, Milan, and at the Doge's Palace, before appearing in the role at Covent Garden and at English National Opera (in the production by Jonathan Miller which is recorded here). Charles Craig died in January 1997.

Rosalind Plowright has enjoyed an immensely distinguished career. She studied at the Royal Northern College of Music and the London

Opera centre, winning both Peter Moores Foundation and Peter Stuyvesant scholarships. Her 1984 recording of Leonora (*Il trovatore*) with Plácido Domingo, conducted by Carlo Maria Giulini, was nominated for a *Grammy* Award. That same year she made her debut with The Royal Opera as Maddalena (*Andrea Chénier*) with José Carreras, and *Aida* with Luciano Pavarotti.

Rosalind Plowright has performed at most of the world's great opera houses, in roles such as Suor Angelica (La Scala, Milan), Leonora in *Il trovatore* (Verona), Stiffelio (La Fenice, Venice), Ariadne and Medea (Opéra Bastille, Paris), Desdemona and Amelia (Vienna State Opera), *Madama Butterfly* (Houston Grand Opera), and Santuzza (Berlin Staatsoper). For English National Opera she has performed in *Otello*, *Mary Stuart*, *The Turn of the Screw* (for which she won an *Olivier* Award) and Puccini's *The Cloak*. Recordings include Mendelssohn's *Elijah* (on Chandos), Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, Verdi's *Il trovatore*, and (for Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation) *Mary Stuart*.

Neil Howlett won the Kathleen Ferrier Memorial Scholarship while at Cambridge University, and subsequently studied in

Vienna, Milan and Stuttgart. His successful international career includes performances for the English Opera Group (with Benjamin Britten), The Royal Opera, Welsh National Opera, Scottish Opera, and English National Opera, where he was leading baritone for fifteen years. He has performed well over eighty roles, covering a wide range of repertoire; notable examples include *Scarpia*, *Iago*, *Macbeth*, *Boccanegra*, *Renato*, *Amfortas*, *Golaud*, *Almaviva* and *Jokanaan*. International appearances cover Italy, France, Germany, Scandinavia, South America and the United States, and in his concert repertoire he has sung with all the major British orchestras.

He was a professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama from 1974 to 1992, when he was appointed Head of Vocal Studies and later Director of Repertoire Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music. Since 1998 he has received critical acclaim for his performances as Wotan/Wanderer and continues to teach privately in London and Lincolnshire.

Born in England of Italian descent, **Bonaventura Bottone** studied at the Royal Academy of Music. With The Royal Opera he has appeared as the Italian Singer (*Der*

Rosenkavalier), Raoul (*Les Huguenots*), Cassio (*Otello*) and Count Libensko (Il viaggio a Reims), whilst at English National Opera he has created twenty major roles including Rodolfo (*La bohème*), Faust (*The Damnation of Faust*), Duke (*Rigoletto*) and Lensky (*Eugene Onegin*). He has also appeared with Glyndebourne Festival Opera, Opera North, Scottish Opera and Welsh National Opera in roles such as Loge (*Das Rheingold*), Turiddu (*Cavalleria rusticana*), Alfredo (*La traviata*) and Fernando (*La favorita*).

Appearances abroad have taken him to the Bavarian State Opera, Houston Opera House, Metropolitan Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Opéra Bastille, Paris, and New Israeli Opera, and he has appeared in concert in Germany, Norway, Poland and Spain. Recordings include *The Mikado*, Kurt Weill's *Street Scene* and Vaughan Williams's *Hugh the Drover*.

Shelagh Squires studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She has appeared with English National Opera, at the Glyndebourne Festival and Touring Operas, and The Metropolitan Opera, New York among others; she has also performed at the Bergen International Festival and in Vienna

and Japan. Her wide repertoire includes Ottavia (*L'incoronazione di Poppea*), Marcellina (*Le nozze di Figaro*), Ulrica (*Un ballo in maschera*), Magdalene (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*), Herodias (*Salome*), Annina (*Der Rosenkavalier*), Adelaide (*Arabella*), Martha (*Faust*), the Witch (*Rusalka*) and Filipyevna (*Eugene Onegin*). Recordings include *La traviata*, *The Rhinegold* and *Twilight of the Gods* (all for Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation).

Stuart Kale is internationally recognised as one of the most outstanding singing actors in the operatic world and his roles cover a huge range of repertoire, from Monteverdi to Messiaen. He began his career at Welsh National Opera before joining English National Opera, where he remained for eight years, singing roles such as Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*), Michael (Martinů's *Jiuletta*), Alfred (*Die Fledermaus*) and Nanki-Poo in Jonathan Miller's production of *The Mikado*.

Notable engagements include the High Priest (*Idomeneo*) at Covent Garden, Hauptmann (*Wozzeck*) in Nancy, San Francisco and at the Opera du Rhin in Strasbourg, Shuisky (*Boris Godunov*) in

Strasbourg, Bordeaux and Montpellier, Peter Quint (*The Turn of the Screw*) for ENO's 1990 Russian Tour, Truffaldino (*The Love for Three Oranges*) for ENO, Zinoviev (*Lady Macbeth*) in Toulouse and Marseille, the three tenor roles in *Lulu* at the Châtelet. Recordings include Shuisky in *Boris Godunov* (highlights) and Goro (*Madam Butterfly*) for Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation.

Malcolm Rivers studied at the Royal College of Music, London and was coached in the United States by George London and in London by Josephine Veasey. He made his debut in Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

He has appeared at numerous international opera houses including The Royal Opera, Teatro San Carlo, Naples, La Monnaie, Brussels, the Aldeburgh and Edinburgh Festivals, the Los Angeles Music Theatre, the Teatro Comunale, Florence, La Fenice, Venice, the Staatsoper, Vienna, the Houston Grand Opera and Drottningholm. Among his many roles are Scarpia (*Tosca*), Commandant (*From the House of the Dead*) and Eisenhardt (*Die Soldaten*) for English National Opera; the Judge (*Sweeney Todd*) for Opera North; Geistergebot (*Die Frau ohne Schatten*) and

Gunther (*Götterdämmerung*) for Marseille Opera; Alberich (*Das Rheingold*) for Arizona Opera; and Sacristan (*Tosca*) for Bordeaux Opera.

Recordings include *Pacific Overtures*, *La fanciulla del West*, *The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Mikado*.

Critically and publicly acclaimed, the **English National Opera Orchestra** (Leader Barry Griffiths) has in recent years received several prestigious awards, including the *Royal Philharmonic Society Music Award* and an *Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Opera*. The Orchestra is at the heart of the Company's artistic life and as well as opera performances in the London Coliseum has also been seen on the concert platform. In addition many of the players participate in the work of the Baylis Programme of the Company's education and outreach department and with the English National Opera Studio in the development of new operas, in particular Mark-Anthony Turnage's *The Silver Tassie* which had its world premiere in February 2000. The Orchestra appears in many recordings, including for Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation, *Mary Stuart*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Barber of Seville*,

Rigoletto (Jonathan Miller's production), *La traviata* and *Werther*.

The Chorus of English National Opera is one of the Company's finest assets. In countless English National Opera productions they have thrilled audiences with the power of their singing and the intensity of their acting. There are sixty-eight choristers and the wide range of skills and experience they bring to performances distinguish any production in which they appear. Particular triumphs for the Chorus have been Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Britten's *Billy Budd* and *Peter Grimes*, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, Bizet's *Carmen* and Verdi's *Otello*. Their Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation recordings are the 'Ring Cycle' conducted by Reginald Goodall, *Ernani*, *Mary Stuart*, *Julius Caesar*, *Rigoletto* (Jonathan Miller's production) and *La traviata*.

Mark Elder, who was awarded the CBE in 1989, has held distinguished posts both in the United Kingdom and abroad. These include Music Director of English National Opera (1979–93), Music Director of the Rochester

Philharmonic Orchestra in the USA (1989–94) and Principal Guest Conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (1992–5), a position he has also held with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the London Mozart Players. In September 2000 he will become Music Director of the Hallé Orchestra.

He works regularly with leading orchestras throughout Europe and North America, including the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Orchestre de Paris and the Symphony Orchestra of North German Radio.

In the UK he enjoys close associations with both the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and has appeared annually at the BBC Promenade Concerts.

He conducts regularly in such prominent international opera houses as the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, The Metropolitan Opera, the Opéra national de Paris-Bastille, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Glyndebourne Festival Opera and Bavarian State Opera. Other guest engagements have taken him to the Bayreuth Festival and to Amsterdam, Geneva, Berlin and Sydney.

With English National Opera he made acclaimed tours of the USA (including performances at The Metropolitan Opera) and Russia (including performances at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow and the

Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg). Most recently his operatic engagements have included productions of *Mefistofele* (Boito) and *Otello* for The Metropolitan Opera.



Rosalind Plowright as Desdemona

PETER MOORES, CBE, DL

Peter Moores was born in Lancashire, the son of Sir John Moores, founder of the giant Littlewoods mail order, chain store and football pools group. He was educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, where he read modern languages – he was already fluent in German and Italian. It was opera, however, which was his great love. He had worked at Glyndebourne Festival Opera before going up to university, and after Oxford he became a production student at the Vienna State Opera, combining this with a three-year course at the Vienna Academy of Music and Dramatic Art.

By the end of his third year at the Academy Moores had produced the Vienna premiere of Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*, had worked as Assistant Producer at the San Carlo Opera House, Naples, the Geneva Festival and Rome Opera, and seemed set for a successful operatic career. At this point he received a letter from his father asking him to come home as he was needed in the firm. Family loyalty being paramount, he returned to Liverpool.

From 1981 to 1983 he was a Governor of the BBC, and a Trustee of the Tate Gallery from 1978 until 1985; from 1988 to 1992 he was a director of Scottish Opera. He received the Gold Medal of the Italian Republic in 1974, an Honorary MA from Christ Church, Oxford, in 1975, and was made an Honorary Member of the Royal Northern College of Music in 1985. In May 1992 he became Deputy Lieutenant of Lancashire, and in the New Year's Honours List for 1991, he was made a CBE for his charitable services to the Arts.

Whilst still in his early twenties, Peter Moores had started



Christina Burron/PMF

Peter Moores, CBE, DL

giving financial support to various young artists, several of whom – Joan Sutherland, Colin Davis and the late Geraint Evans amongst them – were to become world-famous. In 1964 he set aside a substantial part of his inheritance to establish the Peter Moores Foundation, a charity designed to support those causes dear to his heart: to make music and the arts more accessible to more people; to give encouragement to the young and to improve race relations.

PETER MOORES FOUNDATION

In the field of music, the main areas supported by the Peter Moores Foundation are:

the recording of operas from the core repertoire sung in English translation; the recording or staging of rare Italian opera from the *bel canto* era of the early nineteenth century (repertoire which would otherwise only be accessible to scholars); the nurturing of promising young opera singers; new operatic work.

The Foundation awards scholarships annually to students and post-graduates for furthering their vocal studies at the Royal Northern College of Music. In addition, project awards may be given to facilitate language tuition in the appropriate country, attendance at masterclasses or summer courses, specialised repertoire study with an acknowledged expert in the field, or post-graduate performance training.

The Foundation encourages new operatic work by contributing to recordings, the publication of scores and stage productions.

Since 1964 the Foundation has supported the recording of more than forty operas, many of these sung in English, in translation. It has always been Peter Moores's belief that to enjoy opera to the full, there must be no language barrier, particularly for newcomers and particularly in the popular repertoire – hence the *Opera in English* series launched with Chandos in 1995. This includes many of the English language recordings funded by the Foundation in the 1970s and 1980s, and is now the largest recorded collection of operas sung in English.



Bonaventura Bottone as Cassio and Neil Howlett as Iago



Neil Howlett as Iago and
Shelagh Squires as Emilia

Giuseppe Verdi: Otello

Zu beachten: Der Name Othello bezieht sich auf die Shakespearesche Tragödie, Otello auf die Oper von Verdi.

Otello: Drama und Musik

Nach dreißig „Galeerenjahren“, in denen sich Verdi den Konventionen der italienischen Oper und dem Geschmack seines Publikums fügen mußte, ging er in den Ruhestand. Seine Finanzen waren gesichert und er zog das Leben als Landwirt und Philanthrop der mühsamen Existenz im Opernhaus vor. Daß ihn seine Freunde und sein gewitzter Verleger Giulio Ricordi von seinem Mißtrauen gegen Arrigo Boito abbringen konnten; daß die beiden gemeinsam an *Otello* und *Falstaff* arbeiteten (sowie an der Revision von *Simon Boccanegra*); daß er enge Freundschaft mit Boito schloß, der sogar sein Ersatz-Sohn wurde und an seinem Totenbett saß, steht alles in den Biographien von Frank Walker und anderen Autoren. Verdis und Boitos Beitrag zur Opernliteratur wird zu Recht gepriesen, und in der Tat kann sich *Otello* an Leidenschaft und Zärtlichkeit ohne weiteres mit Shakespeares Held messen. Überdies

mußte Shakespeare seine Tragödie sehr ausführlich gestalten, um Desdemonas Fürbitte für Cassio Glaubwürdigkeit zu verleihen; indem er den Kontrast ihrer musikalischen Stile auswertete, konnte Verdi eine ähnliche Wirkung erzielen, die gedrängter und intensiver war als die seiner Vorlage.

Bei Shakespeare spielt der erste Akt in Venedig und handelt von Desdemonas Liebe zum Mohren Othello, dem Befehlshaber der Flotte. Ihr Vater ist außer sich über ihre heimliche Ehe; Othello muß sich rechtfertigen und es stellt sich heraus, daß die beiden einander aufrichtig lieben. Der Vater beruhigt sich; Othello wird zum Statthalter von Zypern ernannt, um die venetianische Kolonie gegen die Türken zu verteidigen. Diesen Akt ließen Verdi und Boito völlig weg, wodurch das lange Schauspiel erheblich gekürzt und der Musik mehr Zeit zur Entfaltung gewährt wurde; indes blieb der Zweck des Aktes, nämlich die Definition der Hauptpersonen und ihre Beziehungen zueinander, erhalten. Der **Erste Akt** der Oper besteht aus herkömmlichen „Nummern“ (Sturm, Siegeshymne, Feuerchor, Trinklied,

Liebesduett); weniger herkömmlich ist der Umstand, daß sie durch die Handlung, die sich während und zwischen den Nummern abspielt, sowie das durchkomponierte musikalische Geschehen eng verzahnt sind.

Es gibt keine Ouvertüre, nicht einmal ein Vorspiel. Mit furchtbarem Getöse geht der Vorhang hoch; auf der Bühne tobt ein Orkan. Wildes Chaos herrscht: Leute eilen im strömenden Regen hin und her, nur manchmal von grellen Blitzen beleuchtet, während der Donner von Kanonenschüssen unterbrochen wird, die aufs Meer signalisieren. (Diese Vorgänge sind alle genau orchestriert und in der Partitur angegeben.) Otellos Schiff wird auf einen Augenblick gesichtet. Es scheint dem Untergang geweiht, und das erregte Volk begleitet den Aufruhr mit einer mächtigen Hymne, die laut den Bühnenanweisungen „mit sichtbarer Angst, dem Bollwerk zugewendet“ gesungen wird. Keine andere italienische Oper hatte bislang eine so gewaltige, genau orchestrierte Sturmszene enthalten. Gewitter gab es in Hülle und Fülle, deren Zweck es war, die Handlung zu verzögern, die Spannung zu steigern und das Orchester vorübergehend ins Rampenlicht zu rücken (ein Musterbeispiel des Genres befindet sich am Ende von Rossinis

Barbiere di Siviglia). Aber keines wütete so furchtbar und tobte so wild – und keines konnte das Milieu und die Handlung so großartig bestimmen.

Unmittelbar nach dem Gebet der Menge tritt die erste der drei Hauptpersonen auf, und Jago beweist sogleich seine Niedertracht: „Das Besansegel ist zerrissen!... Der Meeresstrudel soll sein Grab sein!“ (The mainsail's split in two!... Let angry breakers smash the ship and drown her general!) Kaum gesagt, ist sein verruchter Wunsch schon abgeschlagen: „Gerettet!“ (She's safe now!) ruft das Volk und Otello steigt an Land. In keiner anderen Oper hat der Tenor einen frappanteren – oder schwierigeren – Auftritt, denn er muß auf die Bühne laufen und sofort eine schallende, heroische Phrase anstimmen (bis zum hohen A), ohne jedes Rezitativ, mit dem er sich einsingen könnte. Mit drei Sätzen erweist sich Otello als Befehlshaber und Führer, und das Volk jubelt ihm sogleich zu: „Evviva Otello!“ Obwohl seine ersten Worte seine Untergebenen so beglücken, soll der Befehl, zu frohlocken, weil der stolze Muselman vernichtet ist, im Verlauf der Oper eine furchtbare Ironie annehmen. Der frohe Chor geht zu Ende und das Unwetter legt. Das Volk singt „Der Sturm legt sich“ (A calm succeeds

the storm now – auch diese Phrase wird ironisch widerhallen) und man empfindet eine herrliche Entspannung, die Verdi erzielt, indem er eine störende Dissonanz auf drei benachbarten Halbtönen (C–Cis–D) auflöst, die seit dem ersten Takt der Oper auf einer Orgel erklingen ist.

In der entspannteren Stimmung wendet sich Jago zum jungen Venezianer Rodrigo, der in Desdemona verliebt ist und heitert ihn auf, indem er ihm versichert, Desdemona werde ihres Gatten bald überdrüssig sein. Jago gesteht auch, daß er Cassio, der befördert wurde, haßt – und Otello nicht minder, weil er selbst von ihm übergangen wurde. Er schließt mit einer seiner öligen Phrasen mit dem Triller, der für viele seiner bezeichnendsten Aussagen typisch ist. Die beiden gehen nach hinten (außer Hörweite), während das Volk ein Freudenfeuer anfacht und zu singen beginnt: “Feuer der Freude” (Flame of rejoicing) – wieder ein Gemeinplatz der italienischen Oper, den Verdi in einem Brief an Ricordi als “diese elende Freudenfeuer-Szene” beschrieb. Obwohl er von dieser Chorszene wenig hielt, ist der hurtige, leichte Satz hinreißend; außerdem ist sie aus der Entfaltung des Aktes nicht wegzudenken, denn sie ist ein Element im sorgfältig

abgestuften Übergang von der explosiven Eröffnung bis zum besinnlichen Duett, das ihn beschließt. Das Feuer und der Gesang vergehen; Rodrigo und Jago treten zu Cassio, dem neuen Hauptmann der Wache. Jago fordert seine Freunde auf, zu trinken; Cassio weigert sich zunächst, denn er hat bereits seinen Durst gestillt, aber einen Toast auf Otello und Desdemona kann er nicht abschlagen. Es folgt ein Paradebeispiel von Verdis genialer Umwandlung des Alten in das Neue. Cassio besingt Desdemonas Schönheit und Güte. Jago kann Rodrigo überzeugen, daß er einen Rivalen hat; dann stimmt er sein Brindisi an. Zunächst wendet er sich an Cassio, dessen Replik Jagos Strophe in Text und Musik ergänzt. Jagos Refrain mitsamt seinem Triller und einer chromatischen Abwärtsskala wird vom Chor wiederholt. Nach einer kurzen Nebenbemerkung zu Rodrigo wiederholt sich das Schema: die gleiche Melodie, aber im Orchester wird getrillert. Dieselbe Nebenbemerkung (“Noch ein Schluck, und er ist berauscht” – One more glass and he'll be drunk), dann kommt die dritte Strophe. Die Begleitung ist noch ausführlicher – auch vom dramaturgischen Standpunkt, denn Cassio ist schon so betrunken, daß er vorzeitig einsetzt und damit

den Ablauf des musikalischen Schemas auf den Kopf stellt. Anstelle des Refrains wird er vom Chor ausgelacht; Jago hetzt Rodrigo gegen Cassio auf, der bald aggressiv wird; auf Jagos Anraten schlägt Rodrigo Alarm, Montano, Otellos Vorgänger als Statthalter von Zypern, greift ein und wird verwundet. Die Musik wird hektisch; Otello tritt auf (“Nieder mit den Degen” – Your swords cast before me!) und bei seinem Rezitativ (Streicher mit kurzen Einwüfen der Bläser) legt sich der Aufruhr. Otello will wissen, wie der Streit entstanden ist und der scheinheilige Jago bezichtigt Cassio. Der Lärm hat auch Desdemona gestört und sie kommt herbei. Der wütende Otello degradiert Cassio, dann befiehlt er Ruhe und bleibt endlich mit seiner Gattin allein.

Ein Solocello begleitet von geteilten Celli, alle *con sordino*, eröffnet das herrliche Liebesduett, dessen Inhalt sehr geschickt aus Texten von Shakespeares erstem und zweitem Akt zusammengestellt ist. Dieses zärtliche, sehnstüchtige, zugleich auch leidenschaftliche Duett enthält nicht nur eine Welt zauberhafter Klänge, sondern es offenbart auch die liebevollen Bande, die Otello und Desdemona verknüpfen. Der Höhepunkt ist die herrliche Passage, an der Otello dreimal um einen Kuss bittet und die sich im letzten Akt noch

zweimal wiederholt. Diese Küsse sind der Angelpunkt der Tragödie, mit ihrem Motiv, das am Ende der Oper ganz besondere Bedeutung annimmt, schließt sich der Kreis. Doch im ersten Akt rundet das Duett mit schimmernden Streichen, Harfe und Bläsern sowie einem letzten Nachhall seiner Eröffnungssphrasen das gewaltige *Decrescendo* ab, das Verdi für den ganzen Akt gestaltet hat.

Am Anfang des **Zweiten Aktes** besprechen sich Jago und Cassio über dessen Mißgeschick. Die aufwendig verarbeitete Einleitung des Orchesters beruht auf dem “Jago”-Motiv – zunächst heftig, später schmeichlerisch, je nach der vorherrschenden Stimmung. Erst rät er dem niedergeschlagenen Cassio, Desdemona um ihre Fürbitte bei Otello zu ersuchen, dann schickt er den Düpierten fort. Die Anweisung wird wiederholt, aber in einem ganz anderen Tonfall; nach einem gehässigen Ausbruch des Orchesters stimmt er sein teuflisches Credo an. Hier erweiterte Boito Shakespeares “Divinity of Hell” (bei Schlegel-Tieck mit “Theologie der Hölle” übersetzt) nach seiner Unterweisung an Cassio, während er seinen Schlatplan ausarbeitet, zu einem unverblühten, nihilistischen Glaubensbekenntnis des Bösen. Gott ist grausam; der Mensch, in Gottes Ebenbild geschaffen, ist

böse – ein Spielzeug des Schicksals. Und wenn diese Farce, das Leben, zu Ende ist, kommt der Tod. Und dann? (*pp legato*) – der Tod und das Nichts. Der Himmel ist ein Ammenmärchen. Wieherndes Gelächter der Blechbläser. Dank der vielen Triller, der weitgespannten Dynamik von *ppp* bis *ff*, des überwiegend deklamatorischen Vortrags dieser aufwühlenden Arie ist Verdi Jago ein viel positiverer Schurke als Shakespeares, wo ihn nicht der Glaube, sondern Gerüchte und Selbstbelehrung motivieren. Mit eiskalter Freundlichkeit spinnt er sein Netz. Cassio tritt zu Desdemona; Jago drückt, scheinbar nur für sich, seine Besorgnis aus, aber Otello hat ihn gehört. Er warnt ihn vor der Eifersucht – vier glatte Phrasen genügen, um das Gift zu träufeln.

Anfänglich wollte Verdi die Oper *Jago* zu nennen. In einem Brief an seinen Freund, den neapolitanischen Maler Domenico Morelli, widersprach er dessen Konzept des Jago als eines kleinen, boshaften Mannes und erklärte, wie er ihn sich vorstellte:

...Wäre ich ein Schauspieler, der den Jago spielen soll, wäre mir ein großer, hagerer Mensch lieber, mit schmalen Lippen, die Augen eng an der Nase wie bei einem Affen, einer breiten, fliehenden Stirn und starkem Hinterkopf;

nonchalant, teilnahmslos, witzig, spricht Gutes und Böses fast gleichgültig, ohne sich darüber Gedanken zu machen. Und wenn man ihm vorwirft, daß er Übles spricht, antwortet er: "Wirklich? Das dachte ich nicht: lassen wir's gut sein!"...

So ein Mensch kann jeden hintergehen, sogar – bis zu einem gewissen Grad – die eigene Frau. Ein kleiner, bösartiger Mensch ist sofort verdächtig und kann niemandem etwas vormachen! Amen.

Cassio hat sich von Desdemona verabschiedet; Zypriotische Frauen und Kinder bringen ihr Blumen und Obst. Diese Szene wird manchmal als zu lang und dramaturgisch überflüssig abgelehnt. Indes erzielt sie mit der zauberhaft schlichten Hinzufügung einer Mandoline, Gitarre und Sackpfeife genau die richtige Wirkung, denn sie zeigt Desdemonas Anmut, wie sie anderen erscheint, und ohne die Dimensionen wäre die anschließende Handlung unglaublich. Desdemonas ganzer Liebreiz gibt sich in ihren Dankesworten zu erkennen ("Der Himmel strahlt" – Heaven is smiling). Otello ist hingerissen; sogar Jago kann ihre Schönheit nicht leugnen, aber er ist entschlossen, sie zu zerstören. Als bald ergibt sich die Gelegenheit dazu. Desdemona tritt zu Otello und bittet

ihn um Nachsicht für Cassio. Er weist sie schroff ab, klagt über Kopfschmerz und wirft das Taschentuch, das sie ihm zur Linderung bietet, wütend zu Boden. Emilia, Jagos Gattin und Desdemonas Vertraute, tritt auf und es entspinnt sich ein Quartett des uneinigen Ehepaars, des Intriganten und seiner Frau; Emilia hat das Taschentuch aufgehoben und er entreißt es ihr. Das Quartett ist unglaubliche subtil: die Stimmen vermengen sich und wandern von einer Gruppe zur anderen, getragen von einer Begleitung, die zugleich die schmachthenden Linien mit spitzen Figuren untermalt. Desdemona und Emilia gehen fort, aber die Begleitung bleibt unverändert, während der erschöpfte Otello in einen Stuhl sinkt.

Jago verbirgt das Taschentuch; er plant, so Shakespeare (Schlegel-Tieck)

...Ich will bei Cassio das Tuch verlieren,
Da soll ers finden; Dinge, leicht wie Luft
Sind für die Eifersucht Beweis, so stark
Wie Bibelsprüche.

Jago nähert sich dem verstörten Otello, der in einen Wutanfall ausbricht. Sein Rezitativ ("Du? Zurück! Flieh!" – You? Be careful! Leave me!) ist so ungestüm, daß es die Arie, in der er sich der Verzweiflung hingibt, nicht einleitet, sondern geradezu in sie überfließt. Ihr

Marschrhythmus und kriegerischer Ton wird durch Triolen getrübt, die auch in Otellos Gesangslinie eindringen. Als er sein hohes B erreicht und Jago vorgibt, ihn beruhigen zu wollen, spielen die Streicher (*ppp molto staccato e tremolo*) unaufhaltsame, spitze Triolen. Otello verlangt unzweideutige, konkrete Beweise und ist so erregt, daß er Jago an der Gurgel packt.

Scheinbar unwillig streut Jago noch mehr Salz in die Wunde: Mit seiner einschmeichelndsten Stimme berichtet er, daß Cassio im Traum seine Liebe zu Desdemona besungen und dem Schicksal geflucht hat, das sie dem Mohren auslieferte. Die Flöten und eine Oboe spielen leise mit den Streichern, während Jago Cassio auf dem wiederholten hohen C, das chromatisch zum D ansteigt, "zitiert" ("Wir müssen vorsichtig sein" – We must be careful) und dann eine ganz Oktave chromatisch herabgeleitet. Das nächste "Zitat", begleitet von trüben Klarinetten, Fagotten und Hörnern, singt er mit hohler, düsterer Stimme; das Vortragszeichen ist *dolcissimo*, aber das Zeitmaß (6/8) wird von der Betonung auf dem schwachen Takteil verunsichert, bis der Traum zu Ende geht. Diese herrliche Erzählung, verbunden mit ihrem erlogenen Inhalt, ist zu viel für Otello. Seine Reaktion

(“Ungeheure Schuld!” – Now I’m sure she’s guilty!) ist ganz leise – wie betäubt; er verurteilt nicht, er urteilt nur. Jago will den Beweis anhand des Taschentuchs, Otello erster Liebsgabe an Desdemona, liefern, das er angeblich in Cassios Händen gesehen hat. Otello verfällt wieder in wilden Ingrim (ff: “Oh, gäbe ihm Gott doch tausend Leben!” – Ah! Would that God had given him twenty thousand lives!). Triolen dominieren von neuem die Begleitung, bis Otello sie mit drei Wahnsinnsausbrüchen beendet (“Ah! Blut! Blut! Blut!” – Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance!). Auf den Knien schwört er Rache, zunächst auf derselben Note, umspielt von Bläserfiguren. Jago verhindert ihn, sich zu erheben, kniet selbst hin und stimmt in den Schwur ein. Erst wenn beide zugleich singen, wird klar, daß die Melodielinie bei Jago liegt: er gibt im wahrsten Sinn des Wortes den Ton an, während Otello nur die Gegenmelodie singt – ein heroischer Aktschluß.

Den **Dritten Akt** eröffnet der kunstvollste Kontrapunkt der ganzen Oper mit geheimnisvollen Klängen das zugleich Jago und die Eifersucht darstellt. Die Musik steigert sich zum Höhepunkt und verebbt, dann meldet ein Herold, daß eine venezianische Gesandtschaft gesichtet wurde. Otello

lakonisches “Nur weiter” – Continue) richtet sich nicht nur an Jago, sondern auch an die Eifersucht, die in ihm wühlt. In diesem Akt wird seine qualvolle Unsicherheit zur (scheinbaren) Gewißheit, denn Jago plant, Cassio zu holen und zu provozieren, bis er seine Schuld offenbart. Er verläßt Otello mit der Warnung, das Taschentuch nicht zu vergessen.

Desdemonas Auftritt ist in herrlich lyrischen Tönen gehalten; ihre aufrichtige Liebe zu Otello steht in deutlichem Kontrast zu seiner kühlen Höflichkeit. Sie setzt sich wieder für Cassio ein und er fragt sie, zunehmend erregter, in aufsteigenden Phrasen nach dem Taschentuch. In ihrer Unwissenheit bringt sie die Rede neuerlich auf Cassio. Otello verliert vollends die Fassung: sie soll ihre Unschuld beschwören. Ihre aufrichtigen, in emotionalen Tönen ausgedrückten Beteuerungen treiben ihn zur Raserei. Verdis ausdrücklichen Bühnenanweisungen entsprechend, weicht Otello Wut plötzlich eisigen Ironie, die noch viel schrecklicher ist. Indem er ihre eigene Musik zitiert, führt er sie an die Tür, wo er sie als “die abscheuliche Hure, Otello Gattin” beschimpft und davonjagt. Nun stimmt der völlig gebrochene Otello die erschütterndste Arie der Oper an.

Zunächst nur auf einer einzigen Note – erheblich ausdrucksstärker als der übliche *Belcanto*, während das Orchester unablässig eine kleine Figur durch harmonische und kontrapunktische Wendungen treibt. Jede neue Gestalt verleiht der Darstellung von Otello ganzem Elend und vergeblichen Bemühungen, seiner Qual ein Ende zu machen, stärkere psychologische Ausdruckskraft. Diese Arie ist wohl Verdis größte tragische Errungenschaft: in keinem anderen Werk spricht das Orchester in so deutlich wagnerschen Klängen, und dabei ist es unverfälschter Verdi, denn im richtigen Moment steigt die Stimme allmählich an und nimmt mit der Schilderung der erloschenen Sonne, des lebenspendenden Lächelns, lyrische Gestalt an. In dem Augenblick, da er sein Schicksal verflucht und schwört, daß auf den Beweis der Schuld der Tod steht, kehrt Jago zurück: Cassio kommt. Es geschieht so schnell, daß Otello zunächst ungestört weitersingt. Sie wechseln ein paar Worte, dann verbirgt er sich, um sie zu belauschen.

In der nächsten Szene unterhält sich Jago recht freizügig mit Cassio über dessen Geliebte Bianca. Otello, der nicht immer in Hörweite ist, nimmt natürlich an, daß sie von Desdemona sprechen. Cassio zeigt Jago das

Taschentuch, das ihm von unbekannter Hand zugesteckt wurde; Jago hält es hoch und Otello vermeint, den “Beweis” zu sehen. Verdis unendlich subtile Musik ist erstaunlich abwechslungsreich – derselbe Satz, der auch den Falstaff, seine letzte, fünf Jahre später entstandene Oper, beseelt. Ein Trompetensignal, Fanfaren und ein Kanonenschuß melden die Ankunft der venezianischen Gesandtschaft und Jago schickt Cassio eilends fort. Während die Zyprioten die Gesandtschaft begrüßen, beschließt Otello auf Jagos Anraten, Desdemona zu erwürgen. Jago verspricht, Cassio selbst zu versorgen und wird von Otello zum Hauptmann befördert.

Das sich anschließende zeremonielle Bild ist so grandios wie das Autodafé in *Don Carlos* oder die Triumphszene in *Aida*. (Als Verdi an der Pariser Erstaufführung – 1894 – arbeitete, schrieb er an dieser Stelle das in Frankreich unerläßliche Ballett. Es war in dramaturgischer Hinsicht unnötig, entspricht aber der Faktur in *Aida* und die Musik ist brilliant; die sechs Takte lange *Anrufung Allahs* ist dramatisch sehr wirksam.) Otello wird nach Venedig zurückberufen und Cassio an seiner Stelle als Statthalter eingesetzt. Als Otello hört, daß Desdemona Jago erklärt, sie hoffe, daß ihr Gatte und Cassio sich aussöhnen können,

gerät er restlos außer sich, beschimpft sie vor allen und schleudert sie zu Boden ("Nieder mit dir und weine!" – So lie there! And weep there!). Desdemona's erschütternde Klage wächst zu einem großen Ensemble heran, das zwar statisch wirkt, doch infolge seiner Dimensionen und Instrumentierung einen lebhaften Kontrast zum düsteren Kolorit des Schlußaktes bietet. Überdies stachelt Jago im Verlauf des Ensembles Rodrigo auf, Cassio zu töten, wenn er nicht Desdemona auf ewig verlieren will. Es entsteht eine Zäsur, dann befiehlt Otello den Anwesenden, sich zu entfernen. Desdemona will ihn beruhigen, aber er verflucht sie und bricht ohnmächtig zusammen. Jago weidet sich an dem Anblick, die abziehende Menge bejubelt den "Löwen von Venedig". Jago, dem Verdi ausdrücklich eine triumphierende Geste vorschreibt, deutet of den bewußtlosen Otello und höhnt "Da liegt der Löwe"! – There lies your Lion! Mit einem letzten, ironischen Ausruf der Menge ("Evviva Otello") fällt der Vorhang. Für die hier eingespielte Pariser Erstaufführung revidierte Verdi dieses Finale von Grund auf, um Jagos Worte besser zur Geltung zu bringen, denn in der ursprünglichen Fassung konnten sie trotz seiner und der Mitwirkenden Bemühungen nicht richtig gehört werden.

Verglichen mit den Gegenströmungen, der raschen Handlungsabfolge und den Massenszenen der vorangegangenen Akte ist der **Vierte Akt** ganz einfach: er handelt lediglich vom symmetrisch angelegten Tod der beiden Hauptpersonen. Die Atmosphäre ist dunkel, intim. Ein leises, melancholisches Englishhorn in düsterem cis-moll will sich zu einer Phrase aufschwingen, sinkt aber matt zurück. Später dient diese Phrase der Desdemona als Melodie für ihr Lied von der Weide, aber hier wird es von Flöten unterbrochen und dumpfe Klarinetten geben Antwort. Nach dreißig langen, chromatisch und kontrapunktisch verarbeiteten Takten geht der Vorhang hoch. Emilia umsorgt Desdemona, die sich zur Nachtruhe bereitet. Sie ist in Todesstimmung und ein Lied, das die Magd ihrer Mutter sang, geht ihr nicht aus dem Kopf ("Meine Mutter hatte eine arme Magd" – My mother once had a poor little servant). Begleitet von den schwermütigen Tönen des Englishhorns singt sie das Lied – drei lange Strophen, deren Wiederholung bedrückend wirkt, aber nicht eintönig, denn Verdi brachte vorsorglich kleine Varianten an, so der Flug der Vögel ("Die Vögel flogen von den dunklen Zweigen herab" – From branches high above sweet birds came flying) und der

plötzliche Windstoß, der ans Fenster schlägt. Schwere, trübe Akkorde begleiten Desdemona, die Emilia gute Nacht sagt; panische Angst überkommt sie: sie umarmt die Gefährtin und nimmt Abschied von ihr. Das Motiv schleicht sich wieder ein, dann gehen die chromatischen Wendungen in tröstlicheres As-dur über: Desdemona kniet vor dem Bild der Gottesmutter und betet. Mit dem Text des *Ave Maria* ist die Darstellung ihres Charakters abgerundet. Ihr Flehen wird impulsiver, dann beruhigt sie sich und geht zu Bett.

Das Orchesterkolorit verdunkelt sich noch mehr: Otello tritt ein. Nur die Kontrabässe, und alle, den Stimmführer ausgenommen, spielen *con sordino*. Er küßt sie dreimal. Kaum hat man begriffen, daß es sich um einen gewaltigen Rückgriff zum Liebsduett im ersten Akt handelt, ist er schon vergangen, ohne zu kadenzieren, und Desdemona erwacht. Otello erwürgt sie. Emilia verschafft sich Eintritt und hört, wie ihre sterbende Herrin sich des Selbstmords anklagt, um Otello zu schützen: "Und sage meinem Herrn, daß ich schuldlos bin... noch im Tode liebe ich ihn... leb wohl". – And tell my Lord that I never wronged him... in death I love him... Farewell. Der rasende Otello bezichtigt sie der Lüge – hat er sie doch selbst getötet: "Oh, sie lügt! Ich habe sie

ermordet." – Oh, she's a liar! I have killed her.

Emilias Geschrei bringt andere Leute auf die Bühne und Jagos Schandtät sowie Otellos Leichtgläubigkeit werden aufgedeckt. Lodovico entwapfnet ihn. Otello erklärt den Anwesenden mit ruhiger Stimme, ihn nicht länger zu fürchten: "Meine Straße ist zu Ende. Oh, Ruhm! Mit Otello ist es vorüber." (Life's weary journey has reached its end. Oh! Glory! Otello's done.) Diese kurze Passage ersetzt neunzehn zauberhafte Zeilen bei Shakespeare ("Gemach! – Nur noch zwei Worte, eh ihr geht."), in denen Othello als sein eigener Ankläger, Verteidiger, Richter und Henker fungiert. Mit ergreifenden Tönen, der Reprise einer früheren Stelle, nimmt er von seiner unschuldig ums Leben gekommenen Gattin Abschied und ersticht sich mit einem verborgenen Dolch. Er küßt sie dreimal, und bei dem dritten Kuß stirbt er (die letzte Silbe vertonte Verdi nicht mehr, sie ist nur ein ersterbender Hauch) und so vollendet sich die Kadenz (und die Oper).

Die tragische Auswirkung dieses Abschlusses beruht nicht nur auf der unmittelbaren musikalischen und dramatischen Substanz. Über Verdis Reprise des Liebesduetts ist viel Tinte vergossen worden; hier beruht das tragische Element auf dem Umstand, daß es

Otellos Hybris im Augenblick seiner Erfüllung (seiner Liebe zu Desdemona) und seiner Vernichtung aufleben läßt. Die erschütternde Wirkung erklärt sich nicht durch Verdis Reminiszenz an ein schon gehörtes Thema, denn das war in der italienischen Oper und auch bei Verdi nichts Neues, z.B. in der *Macht des Schicksals* oder *Aida*. Es handelt sich auch nicht um die schlichte Intensität, mit der Verdi den Stoff verarbeitet (und die auch gar nicht so schlicht ist, denn das gleiche Verfahren wird auch zu Beginn des dritten Aktes verwendet). Indem Verdi in dem Augenblick, da sich die Tragödie erfüllt, zum ersten Akt zurückgreift, gestaltet er das Ganze zu einer Art Zyklus, die einen nötigt, den Anfang aufs neue mit Hinblick auf das Ende zu überprüfen. Und warum? Die Antwort ist subtil und geht direkt auf Shakespeare zurück.

Bei Shakespeare decken sich gewisse Vorstellungen häufig mit kritischen dramaturgischen Motiven. In *Othello* wird Jago den Türken gleichgesetzt, und die Kriegsführung (Othellos Beschäftigung) ist der innere Kampf, dem er schließlich erliegt. Diese Motive erscheinen bei Shakespeare erstmals in der ersten Szene des zweiten Aktes: *Eine Hafenstadt auf Zypern. Platz am Hafen*. In Harold H. Goddards "The Meaning of

Shakespeare" (University of Chicago Press, 1951) benötigte der Autor fast vierzig Seiten, um die Implikationen zu erforschen. Er nannte sie "den sechsten Akt von *Othello*" und beschrieb seine "unhörbare Musik": die Oberfläche der Handlung, die ihren metaphysischen Kern offenbart, nachdem sich die Tragödie abgespielt hat. Verdi dringt unmittelbar in das wilde Herz der Finsternis ein; der Sturm, der nicht vergangen ist sondern erst droht, bringt Othello an Land. Er befiehlt: "Frohlockt! Des Türken Stolz ist ins Meer versenkt; der Ruhm gebührt uns und dem Himmel. Nach unseren Waffen vernichtete ihn der Sturm" (Rejoice! The Turk's pride is buried in the sea; and heaven's is the glory! After our arms the storm destroyed him.) Mit nichten, sagt Shakespeare; und Verdi stimmt deutlich zu: der Sturm beginnt erst, und der "Türke" ist weder versenkt noch vernichtet. Hier liegt die treibende Kraft, von der die Tragödie lebt, und deshalb schrieb Verdi diesen gigantischen Sturm, der sie eröffnet. Mit den hübschen Orchesterzwischenstücken, die im Opernrepertoire grassieren, hat er nichts gemein. Erst nachdem er sich scheinbar gelegt hat (nach diesem riesigen *Decrescendo*, das den ganzen Akt beansprucht), haben sich die

Personen der Tragödie vorgestellt, die in diesen drei Küssen ihren Anfang nimmt. Wie der Dichter T.S. Eliot später die Worte einer tragischen Königin paraphrasierte – "In meinem Anfang ist mein Ende", geht der Vorhang über Verdis größtem Drama hoch.

Benedict Sarnaker

Übersetzung: Gery Bramall

Charles Craig (1919 geboren) hatte immer den Wunsch, Sänger zu werden, mußte jedoch, da seine Familie bedürftig war, andere Arbeit annehmen, ehe er bei Ausbruch des Zweiten Weltkriegs zum Militär ging. Im Jahr 1947 trat er dem Chor der Covent Garden Opera bei. Sein Debüt in den Konzertsälen Londons gab er 1952 unter der Leitung von Sir Thomas Beecham, und im Jahr darauf wurde er als Erster Tenor an die Carl Rosa Opera verpflichtet, wo er als Rodolfo (*La bohème*) debütierte; außerdem sang er dort Des Grieux (in Puccinis *Manon Lescaut*) und die Titelrolle der britischen Erstaufführung von Berlioz' *Benvenuto Cellini*. Er wechselte 1956 zur Sadler's Wells Opera und gab dort unter anderem Samson, Andrea Chénier und den Prinzen in der ersten britischen Inszenierung von Dvořáks *Rusalka*. Sein erster

Auftritt als Solist in Covent Garden war der als Pinkerton (*Madama Butterfly*); außerdem war er dort als Pollione (*Norma*) und Des Grieux zu sehen. Er hat an vielen bedeutenden Opernhäusern in Europa, Nord- und Südamerika gastiert und war besonders gefragt als Othello, den er in Berlin, an der Mailänder Scala und im Dogenpalast von Venedig darstellte, ehe er in dieser Rolle in Covent Garden und an der English National Opera auftrat (in der hier eingespielten Inszenierung von Jonathan Miller).

Rosalind Plowright hat eine außerordentlich glänzende Laufbahn hinter sich. Sie studierte am Royal Northern College of Music und am London Opera Centre und erhielt dafür Stipendien von der Peter Moores Foundation und der Stiftung Peter Stuyvesant. Die 1984 erschienene Aufnahme von *Il trovatore* unter der Leitung von Carlo Maria Giulini, an der sie neben Plácido Domingo in der Rolle der Leonora mitgewirkt hat, wurde für einen *Grammy* nominiert. Im selben Jahr gab sie ihr Debüt am Royal Opera House als Maddalena (*Andrea Chénier*) neben José Carreras sowie als Aida neben Luciano Pavarotti.

Rosalind Plowright hat an den meisten bedeutenden Opernhäusern der Welt gastiert,

mit Partien wie Suor Angelica (an der Mailänder Scala), Leonora in *Il trovatore* (Verona), Stiffelio (am Teatro La Fenice, Venedig), Ariadne und Medea (Opéra-Bastille, Paris), Desdemona und Amelia (Wiener Staatsoper), Madama Butterfly (Houston Grand Opera) und Santuzza (Berliner Staatsoper). An der English National Opera ist sie in *Otello* aufgetreten, in *Maria Stuarda*, in *The Turn of the Screw* (wofür sie einen *Olivier Award* erhielt) und in Puccinis *Il tabarro*. Zu ihren Aufnahmen auf Tonträger zählen Mendelssohns *Elias* (bei Chandos erschienen), Offenbachs *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Verdis *Il trovatore* und (für Chandos und die Peter Moores Foundation) *Maria Stuarda*.

Neil Howlett hat als Student an der Universität Cambridge ein Stipendium erhalten, das Kathleen Ferrier Memorial Scholarship, und danach in Wien, Mailand und Stuttgart studiert. Seine erfolgreiche internationale Karriere umfaßt Auftritte für die English Opera Group (mit Benjamin Britten), die Royal Opera, Welsh National Opera, Scottish Opera und English National Opera, der er fünfzehn Jahre als Baritonsolist angehört hat. Er hat weit über achtzig Partien gegeben und besitzt ein breites Repertoire,

insbesondere Scarpia, Iago, Macbeth, Boccanegra, Renato, Amfortas, Golaud, Almagiva und Jochanaan. Zu seinen internationalen Gastspielen zählen solche in Italien, Frankreich, Deutschland und Skandinavien, in Südamerika und in den USA; außerdem ist er mit allen bedeutenden britischen Orchestern im Konzertsaal aufgetreten.

Er war von 1974 bis 1992 Professor an der Guildhall School of Music and Drama; dann wurde er zum Leiter der Gesangsabteilung und später Direktor des Fachbereichs Repertoirestudium am Royal Northern College of Music ernannt. Seit 1998 ist er für seine Darbietungen in der Rolle des Wotan/Wanderer von der Kritik immer wieder mit Beifall belohnt worden. Daneben gibt er Privatunterricht in London und Lincolnshire.

Bonaventura Bottone, ein gebürtiger Engländer italienischer Abstammung, hat an der Royal Academy of Music studiert. An der Royal Opera war er als der italienische Sänger (im *Rosenkavalier*) zu sehen, als Raoul (*Les Huguenots*), Cassio (*Otello*) und Conte di Libenskof (*Il viaggio a Reims*), und an der English National Opera hat er zwanzig bedeutende Rollen interpretiert, darunter

Rodolfo (*La bohème*), Faust (*La damnation de Faust*), der Herzog (*Rigoletto*) und Lenski (*Eugen Onegin*). Außerdem ist er an der Glyndebourne Festival Opera, der Opera North, der Scottish Opera und der Welsh National Opera in Rollen wie Loge (*Das Rheingold*), Turiddu (*Cavalleria rusticana*), Alfredo (*La traviata*) und Fernando (*La favorita*) aufgetreten.

Seine Auslandsgastspiele haben ihn an die Bayerische Staatsoper, das Houston Opera House, die Metropolitan Opera, die Lyric Opera of Chicago, die Opéra-Bastille in Paris und die New Israeli Opera geführt; darüber hinaus ist er in Deutschland, Norwegen, Polen und Spanien im Konzertsaal aufgetreten. Zu seinen Aufnahmen auf Tonträger zählen *The Mikado*, Kurt Weills *Street Scene* und Vaughan Williams' *Hugh the Drover*.

Shelagh Squires hat an der Guildhall School of Music and Drama studiert. Sie ist mit dem Ensemble der English National Opera aufgetreten, beim Glyndebourne Festival und mit der Glyndebourne Touring Opera sowie unter anderem an der Metropolitan Opera in New York; außerdem hat sie beim Bergen Festival, in Wien und in Japan gastiert. Ihr breit gefächertes Repertoire umfaßt Ottavia

(*L'incoronazione di Poppea*), Marcellina (*Le nozze di Figaro*), Ulrica (*Un ballo in maschera*), Magdalene (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*), Herodias (*Salome*), Annina (*Der Rosenkavalier*), Adelaide (*Arabella*), Martha (*Faust*), die Hexe (*Rusalka*) und Filipjewna (*Eugen Onegin*). Zu ihren Aufnahmen auf Tonträger zählen *La traviata*, *Das Rheingold* und *Götterdämmerung* (alle drei für Chandos und die Peter Moores Foundation).

Stuart Kale ist international anerkannt als einer der herausragenden singenden Schauspieler der Opernwelt, und seine Rollen decken ein riesengroßes Repertoire von Monteverdi bis Messiaen ab. Er begann seine Karriere an der Welsh National Opera und wechselte dann zur English National Opera (ENO) über, wo er acht Jahre blieb und Rollen wie Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*), Michael (in Martinüs *Julietta*), Alfred (*Die Fledermaus*) und Nanki-Poo in Jonathan Millers Inszenierung von *The Mikado* sang.

Zu seinen denkwürdigen Engagements zählen der Oberpriester (*Idomeneo*) in Covent Garden, der Hauptmann (*Wozzeck*) in Nancy, San Francisco und an der Opéra du Rhin in Straßburg, Schuiski (*Boris Godunow*) in

Straßburg, Bordeaux und Montpellier, Peter Quint (*The Turn of the Screw*) anlässlich der Russlandtournee der ENO im Jahr 1990, Truffaldino (*Die Liebe zu den drei Orangen*) an der ENO, Sinowi (*Lady Macbeth von Mzensk*) in Toulouse und Marseille und die drei Tenorrollen in *Lulu* am Théâtre du Châtelet. Auf Tonträger hat er unter anderem Schuiski in *Boris Godunow* (Auszüge) und Goro (*Madama Butterfly*) für Chandos und die Peter Moores Foundation aufgenommen.

Malcolm Rivers hat am Royal College of Music in London studiert und mit den Korrepetitoren George London (USA) und Josephine Veasey (Großbritannien) zusammengearbeitet. Sein Debüt gab er in Gays *The Beggar's Opera* in einer Inszenierung der Royal Shakespeare Company.

Er ist international an zahlreichen Opernhäusern aufgetreten, so auch an der Royal Opera Covent Garden, am Teatro San Carlo in Neapel, am Théâtre La Monnaie in Brüssel, bei den Festivals von Aldeburgh und Edinburgh, am Los Angeles Music Theatre, Teatro Comunale in Florenz und Teatro La Fenice in Venedig, an der Wiener Staatsoper und der Houston Grand Opera sowie in Drottningholm. Zu seinen zahlreichen Partien

zählen Scarpia (*Tosca*), der Platzkommandant (*Aus einem Totenhaus*) und Eisenhardt (*Die Soldaten*), die er an der English National Opera gesungen hat, der Richter (*Sweeney Todd*) an der Opera North, der Geisterbote (*Die Frau ohne Schatten*) und Gunther (*Götterdämmerung*) an der Opéra de Marseille, Alberich (*Das Rheingold*) an der Arizona Opera und der Sakristan (*Tosca*) am Grand Théâtre de Bordeaux.

Auf Tonträger hat er unter anderem *Pacific Overtures*, *La fanciulla del West*, *The Pirates of Penzance* und *The Mikado* aufgenommen.

Das von der Kritik ebenso wie vom Publikum gefeierte **Orchester der English National Opera** unter Konzertmeister Barry Griffiths hat in den letzten Jahren mehrere angesehene Preise gewonnen, beispielsweise den Musikpreis der *Royal Philharmonic Society* und einen *Olivier Award* für herausragende Leistungen im Bereich der Oper. Das Orchester ist von zentraler Bedeutung für das künstlerische Leben der Truppe und war nicht nur bei Opernvorstellungen im Londoner Coliseum, sondern auch auf dem Konzertpodium zu sehen. Zusätzlich sind viele der Musiker am Baylis-Programm der für

Schul- und Gemeindearbeit zuständigen Abteilung des Orchesters beteiligt und arbeiten mit dem English National Opera Studio an der Entwicklung neuer Opern, speziell an Mark-Anthony Turnages *The Silver Tassie*, das im Februar 2000 uraufgeführt wurde. Das Orchester hat an vielen Einspielungen mitgewirkt, zum Beispiel an denen von Verdis *Ernani* unter David Parry die bei Chandos herauskommen ist. Dies geschieht unter der Schirmherrschaft der Peter Moores Foundation. Andere Aufnahmen des Orchesters für Chandos und die Peter Moores Foundation sind *Maria Stuarda*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Rigoletto* (in der Inszenierung von Jonathan Miller), *La traviata* und *Werther*.

Der **Chor der English National Opera** ist eine Stütze der gesamten Truppe. In zahllosen Produktionen der English National Opera hat er das Publikum mit der Kraft seines Gesangs und der Intensität seiner Darstellung entzückt. Der Chor besteht aus achtundsechzig Sängern, und die weit gefächerten Talente und Erfahrungen, die sie in ihre Darbietungen einbringen, kennzeichnen jede Inszenierung, an der sie mitwirken. Besondere Triumphe für den Chor waren Prokofjews *Krieg und Frieden*,

Schostakowitschs *Lady Macbeth von Mzensk*, Brittens *Billy Budd* und *Peter Grimes*, Mussorgskis *Boris Godunow*, Bizets *Carmen* und Verdis *Otello*. Aufnahmen des Chors für Chandos und die Peter Moores Foundation sind der *Ring*-Zyklus unter der Leitung von Sir Reginald Goodall, *Ernani*, *Maria Stuarda*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Rigoletto* (Regie: Jonathan Miller) und *La traviata*.

Mark Elder, der 1989 zum Commander of the Order of the British Empire ernannt wurde, hat sowohl in Großbritannien als auch anderswo bedeutende Posten innegehabt. Er war u.a. Musikdirektor der English National Opera (1979–1993), Musikdirektor des Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra in den USA (1989–1994) und Erster Gastdirigent des City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (1992–1995), eine Position, die er auch beim BBC Symphony Orchestra und den London Mozart Players bekleidet hat. Im September 2000 wird er die Stelle des Musikdirektors beim Hallé Orchestra antreten.

Er arbeitet regelmäßig mit führenden Orchestern in ganz Europa und Nordamerika zusammen, darunter das Chicago Symphony Orchestra, das Royal Concertgebouw Orkest,

das Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, das Orchestre de Paris und das Sinfonieorchester des Norddeutschen Rundfunks.

In Großbritannien pflegt er enge Beziehungen mit dem London Philharmonic Orchestra ebenso wie mit dem Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment und ist alljährlich bei den BBC Promenade Concerts aufgetreten.

Er ist an berühmten internationalen Opernhäusern wie dem Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, der Metropolitan Opera, der Opéra national de Paris-Bastille, der Lyric Opera of Chicago, der Glyndebourne Festival

Opera und der Bayerischen Staatsoper regelmäßig als Dirigent tätig. Weitere Gastengagements haben ihn zu den Bayreuther Festspielen sowie nach Amsterdam, Genf, Berlin und Sydney geführt.

Mit der English National Opera hat er gefeierte Tourneen durch die USA (samt Aufführungen an der Metropolitan Opera) und Rußland (mit Gastspielen am Moskauer Bolschoi-Theater und am Petersburger Marien-theater) unternommen. Zu seinen jüngsten Opernverpflichtungen gehörten Produktionen von *Mefistofele* (Boito) und *Otello* an der Metropolitan Opera.



Rosalind Plowright as Desdemona and Charles Craig as Otello

Giuseppe Verdi: Otello

Remarque: par commodité, dans cet article, “Othello” renvoie à la pièce de Shakespeare, “Otello” à l’opéra de Verdi; de même pour les titres: *Othello* (Shakespeare), *Otello* (Verdi).

Otello: drame et musique

Au bout d’une trentaine d’années de dur labeur (d’esclavage, disait le compositeur) au service des conventions et du public de l’opéra italien, Verdi prit sa retraite. N’ayant plus de soucis financiers à se faire, il préférait la vie de fermier et de philanthrope au combat désespérant de la production lyrique. Frank Walker a finement décrit dans son livre, *The Man Verdi*, comment ses amis et son éditeur, le rusé Giulio Ricordi, avaient vaincu la défiance de Verdi à l’égard d’Arrigo Boito à force de cajoleries; comment les deux hommes avaient collaboré pour *Otello* et pour *Falstaff* (ainsi que pour la révision de *Simon Boccanegra*); et comment Boito était devenu un ami intime, puis l’une des rares personnes à jouir de la confiance de Verdi, et finalement une sorte de fils de substitution pour le compositeur, présent à son chevet à l’heure de sa mort. Leur réussite dans le domaine de

l’opéra a suscité maints éloges et, de fait, *Otello* rivalise de passion et de tendresse avec la création shakespearienne. De plus, là où Shakespeare doit multiplier les vers (pour rendre plus crédibles les interventions de Desdemona en faveur de Cassio), l’opéra, en opposant les styles musicaux, parvient à un résultat similaire avec plus de force et plus de concision que son modèle.

Le **Premier Acte** de l’*Othello* de Shakespeare se passe à Venise et décrit l’amour de Desdemona pour le général maure Othello. Le père de la jeune femme est furieux lorsqu’il apprend leur mariage secret; un recours s’ensuit devant la cour qui prouve l’authenticité de leur amour. Le père se radoucit quelque peu, et Othello est nommé gouverneur de Chypre afin de défendre la colonie vénitienne contre l’attaque des Turcs. Boito et Verdi abandonnent cet acte (racourcissant ainsi la pièce, très longue, et trouvant le temps nécessaire à la musique) mais conservent sa fonction: établir la personnalité et les relations mutuelles des principaux personnages. Le premier acte de l’opéra est constitué d’une suite de numéros

d’opéra traditionnels (tempête, chant de victoire, chœur auprès du feu, chanson à boire, duo d’amour); ce qui est moins traditionnel en revanche, c’est qu’ils sont étroitement liés entre eux à la fois par l’action, qui se poursuit pendant et entre les numéros, et par la continuité du tissu musical.

L’opéra ne comporte pas d’ouverture, pas même un prélude. Le rideau se lève sur un fracas épouvantable et la tempête se déchaîne sur scène. L’effet est celui d’un chaos: les éclairs révèlent les silhouettes de la foule que l’on entend courir en tous sens sous la pluie et dans l’obscurité, tandis que des coups de canon, tirés pour aider les marins, ponctuent le grondement du tonnerre (tous ces éléments scéniques sont précisément orchestrés par Verdi et méticuleusement positionnés dans la partition). On aperçoit brièvement le navire d’Otello. Un instant, on peut croire qu’il va sombrer, et les spectateurs excités contrepontent le tumulte intermittent d’un grand hymne au Ciel (“Avec des gestes d’épouvante et de supplication, tournés vers le rempart”, précise la didascalie). Jamais l’opéra italien n’avait donné à entendre tempête si puissante et si exactement orchestrée. Les tempêtes abondaient; leur fonction était de suspendre l’action, d’accroître

la tension et d’accorder un bref instant de gloire à l’orchestre (on en trouve un splendide exemple à la fin du *Barbier de Séville* de Rossini), mais aucune n’avait éclaté avec une telle violence, ni été menée avec une telle furie... et aucune n’avait donné autant de caractère et d’action à la scène.

Dès que la fin de l’appel au secours de la foule, nous faisons la connaissance du premier des trois principaux personnages, Iago, qui aussitôt révèle sa malveillance: “È infranto l’artimon!... L’alvo frenetico del mar sia la sua tomba!” (littéralement: “L’artimon est brisé!... Que le lit mouvant de la mer soit son tombeau!”) À peine formulé, ce vœu hostile est cependant déçu: “Il est sauf!” s’écrient les Chypriotes avant qu’Otello lui-même apparaisse quelques instants plus tard. Il n’existe pas d’entrée de ténor plus marquante dans tout l’opéra... ni de plus difficile, car Otello doit se précipiter sur scène et lancer une réplique éclatante, héroïque (montant jusqu’au contre-la) sans pouvoir s’aider d’un seul mot de récitatif. Trois vers lui suffisent pour affirmer sans équivoque son statut de général et de chef – les Chypriotes réagissent aussitôt par un chœur joyeux, “Evviva Otello”. Si les premiers mots d’Otello suscitent le bonheur chez ses sujets, l’ordre qu’il leur

donne de se réjouir de la défaite des Turcs résonnera avec une profonde ironie au fur et à mesure du déroulement de l'œuvre. Le chœur de réjouissance s'achève et la tempête se calme. Tandis que le chœur en fait la remarque ("Si calma la bufera" "La tempête se calme": voilà qui aura aussi un écho ironique), un merveilleux sentiment de détente nous envahit, auquel Verdi parvient en mettant fin à une pédale grave, troublante dans sa discordance, de trois demi-tons conjoints (do, do dièse, ré), maintenue à l'orgue depuis le tout début de l'œuvre.

Dans cette ambiance plus sereine, Iago se tourne vers Roderigo, jeune Vénitien éperdument épris de Desdemona, et flatte sa passion, lui affirmant que la jeune femme se lassera vite de son mari. Iago confesse aussi qu'il hait Cassio, promu à un rang supérieur au sien, et qu'il hait Otello, responsable de cette promotion, terminant l'une de ses phrases mielleuses par ce trille sonore qui marquera nombre de ses interventions les plus caractéristiques. Les deux hommes s'éloignent vers le fond de la scène (et hors de portée de voix) alors que les Chypriotes allument un feu de joie et entament un chant à sa louange ("Fuoco di gioia" "Feu de joie"). C'est là aussi un cliché de l'opéra italien, que Verdi lui-

même décrit (dans une lettre à Giulio Ricordi) comme "cette maudite scène du feu de joie". Nonobstant le dédain affiché à l'égard de ce chœur, son orchestration vive et légère est une merveille, et sa fonction dans l'acte essentielle puisqu'il fait partie intégrante d'une transition soigneusement graduée entre le début mouvementé de l'acte et la sérénité du duo final. Tandis que feu et chœur s'éteignent, Roderigo et Iago rejoignent Cassio, capitaine de la garde. Iago invite ses compagnons à boire et Cassio, qui avait commencé par refuser (il a déjà bu), finit par capituler afin de porter un toast à Otello et à Desdemona. Ce qui s'ensuit est un magnifique exemple du génie avec lequel Verdi sait faire du neuf avec du vieux. Cassio loue la beauté et la bonté de Desdemona – ce dont Iago se sert pour convaincre Roderigo que Cassio est son rival –, et Iago (précédé d'une pétillante introduction orchestrale) se lance dans le "Brindisi". Il s'adresse tout d'abord à Cassio, qui répond par des vers poétiquement et musicalement complémentaires des siens. La dernière partie du schéma est le refrain entonné par Iago (caractérisé par son trille et une gamme chromatique sinieuse), aussitôt repris par le chœur. Un bref dialogue en aparté avec Roderigo, puis ce schéma est repris:

même musique, si ce n'est que la partie d'orchestre s'enrichit de trilles. Même aparté ("Un altro sorso e brillo egli è" "Encore une gorgée et il est ivre"), suivi de la troisième strophe. L'accompagnement est encore renforcé – de même que l'action, car le schéma est privé de sa conclusion habituelle par Cassio, qui, complètement ivre à présent, manque sa réplique et entre trop tôt. Au lieu de reprendre le refrain attendu, le chœur se gausse de l'ivrogne tandis que Iago presse Roderigo de provoquer Cassio, qui titube et ne tarde pas à déclencher une rixe. Tandis que Roderigo (à l'instigation de Iago) sonne l'alarme, Montano (prédécesseur d'Otello au poste de gouverneur) intervient et est blessé. La musique atteint un paroxysme; Otello entre ("Abasso le spade!" "Baissez l'épée!"), et son récitatif (cordes violemment ponctuées ici et là par les vents) calme le chaos. Lorsqu'Otello demande comment la querelle a commencé, Iago insinue perfidement que le blâme en revient à Cassio. Alertée par le bruit, Desdemona paraît. Courroucé, Otello destitue Cassio de son commandement. En quelques injonctions, il rétablit le calme avant de rester seul en scène avec Desdemona.

Introduit par un violoncelle solo avec sourdine, les autres violoncelles étant divisés,

ce superbe duo d'amour commence. Sur un texte habilement tissé à partir d'extraits des premier et deuxième actes shakespeariens, ce duo empli de douceur, de tendresse, de désir et de passion nous captive par la seule beauté de sa sonorité; il établit aussi pleinement la qualité et la profondeur de la relation entre Otello et Desdemona. Le point culminant en est l'épisode d'une beauté sensuelle qui voit Otello à trois reprises demander un baiser – ce triple baiser reviendra par deux fois dans le dernier acte: ce sera l'élément charnière de la tragédie. Le souvenir de ces baisers assure l'unité de l'œuvre et prendra une signification particulière à la fin de l'opéra. Pour l'heure, ce duo, avec un chatolement des cordes, de la harpe et des vents, et une ultime reprise en écho de ses phrases initiales, achève le gigantesque *decrecendo* sur lequel Verdi a bâti tout ce premier acte.

Le **Deuxième Acte** débute par un dialogue entre Cassio et Iago. L'introduction orchestrale, richement développée, est basée sur un motif associé à Iago: féroce au premier abord, puis suave et charmant, il varie au gré de son humeur durant la scène. Ayant suggéré à Cassio, abattu, de demander à Desdemona d'implorer pour lui son pardon auprès d'Otello, Iago éloigne sa dupe ("vanne"), puis

répète ce “vanne” sur un ton beaucoup moins amical et, sur une violente explosion de l’orchestre à l’unisson, entame son Credo satanique. Boito a tiré parti d’une simple allusion chez Shakespeare (Iago, ayant conseillé à Cassio de soumettre son cas à Desdemona, invoque la “Divinité de l’Enfer” en échauffant la suite de son stratagème) pour en faire une véritable profession nihiliste de foi dans le Mal. Dieu est cruel; l’Homme, créé à son image, est malfaisant, pantin du Destin. Après la moquerie de la vie vient la mort... et ensuite? (*pp legato*). Rien. Le Ciel est une vieille fable – tout le groupe des cuivres s’esclaffe de dérision. Mis en musique par Verdi (truffé de trilles, utilisant une palette dynamique très large, du *ppp* au *ff*, et un mode d’expression principalement déclamatoire), ce Credo électrisant révèle un Iago beaucoup plus positivement maléfique qu’il ne l’est chez Shakespeare, où la rumeur et l’auto-endoctrinement, plus que des convictions, sont à la base de sa motivation. Le charme avec lequel il met en œuvre la suite de son intrigue fait froid dans le dos. Tandis que Cassio aborde Desdemona, Iago laisse négligemment tomber une expression suspicieuse qu’Otello surprend. Iago met ce dernier en garde contre la jalousie...

en quatre phrases anodines, le poison est instillé.

Au tout début, Verdi avait songé à intituler son opéra *Iago*. Dans une lettre à un ami, le peintre napolitain Domenico Morelli, il avait réfuté sa conception de Iago comme un être petit et méchant et donné sa propre opinion sur la manière dont Iago devrait être dépeint:

...si j’étais acteur et que je devais jouer Iago, j’aimerais être grand et mince, avec des lèvres minces, de petits yeux rapprochés comme ceux d’un singe, un large front dégarni et le crâne saillant par derrière; et une manière nonchalamment absente, indifférente à tout, spirituelle, disant le Bien et le Mal de manière quasi insouciant, avec un air d’indifférence à tout ce que dit le personnage si bien que si quelqu’un lui reprochait: “Ce que vous dites là est vill”, il pourrait répondre: “Vraiment? Ce n’était pas mon intention... n’en parlons plus!”...

Un tel personnage peut tromper tout le monde, même – jusqu’à un certain point – sa femme. Un être petit et méchant éveille les suspicions de tout le monde et ne trompe personne! Amen.

À quelque distance de là, Cassio a laissé Desdemona entourée de Chypriotes venus lui offrir des fleurs et des fruits. Le langage

musical change à présent et semble étrange au premier abord. Certains critiques ont reproché à cette scène de présenter des longueurs et d’être dramatiquement superflue. Au contraire, grâce à un renfort d’une magique simplicité de mandoline, guitare et petite cornemuse à l’accompagnement orchestral, elle révèle la simple beauté de Desdemona au travers du regard des autres, et sa longueur est essentielle à la crédibilité de la suite de l’action. La grâce de Desdemona rayonne tandis que sa voix s’envole, reprenant en écho les vœux de la foule (“Splendide il cielo” “Le ciel resplendit”): Otello est bouleversé et Iago lui-même reconnaît sa beauté, tout en promettant de la détruire. L’occasion ne se présente que trop tôt. Desdemona s’approche d’Otello et plaide avec douceur la cause de Cassio. Irrité, Otello repousse sa demande et jette au loin le mouchoir auquel elle attribue le pouvoir d’apaiser sa feinte migraine. L’échange se mue en un quatuor magistral lorsque Iago et sa femme Emilia, suivante de Desdemona, se joignent au couple déchiré. Iago arrache le mouchoir à Emilia et lui ordonne de garder le silence – il lui servira à fabriquer la preuve nécessaire à la tragédie. Le raffinement de ce quatuor est extraordinaire: les voix subtilement se fondent et changent de partenaire, tandis

que l’accompagnement tout à la fois les soutient et trouble leurs lignes alanguies par une figuration variée et discrètement mordante. Malgré le départ de Desdemona et d’Emilia, cet accompagnement persiste lorsqu’Otello, vidé par l’émotion, se laisse tomber sur une chaise.

Savourant son projet, comme chez Shakespeare:

*...I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin.
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ...*

[...Je veux perdre ce linge dans les appartements de Cassio

Et lui laisser trouver. Vétilles légères comme l’air
Sont au jaloux confirmation aussi forte

Que preuves tirées des Saintes Écritures...]

Iago dissimule le mouchoir dans son justaucorps. Lorsqu’il s’approche d’Otello, ce dernier laisse exploser sa fureur. Son récitatif est si violent (“Tu? Indietro! fuggi!” “Toi? Arrière! fuis!”) qu’il déborde (plus qu’il ne débouche) dans l’aria où son courage l’abandonne. En dépit de son rythme de marche et de son ton martial, des triolets sinueux sapent son allure carrée et envahissent la ligne vocale. Lorsqu’Otello atteint un

paroxysme sur un contre-*si* bémol et que Iago l'invite à se calmer, les cordes (*ppp molto staccato e tremolo*) fouettent des triolets sans fin tandis que le Maure exige des preuves, des preuves visuelles. Il est tellement à bout qu'il saisit Iago à la gorge.

Avec maintes démonstrations de réticence, Iago s'assure que le poison accomplisse une œuvre irréparable: prenant une fois encore sa voix la plus sensuelle, il rapporte un rêve dans lequel Cassio aurait décrit son amour pour Desdemona et maudit le sort qui l'a donnée au Maure. Flûtes et hautbois se joignent tout doucement aux cordes lorsque Iago "cite" les paroles de Cassio sur un contre-ut répété montant chromatiquement à ré ("Cauti vegliamo" "Soyons prudents") avant de redégringoler (chromatiquement !) une octave. La suite de sa "citation" (désormais assombrie par clarinettes, basson et cors) est prononcée d'une voix caverneuse et sombre – en dépit de l'indication *dolcissimo*, la mesure à 6/8 est ébranlée par de discrets accents sur les temps faibles, et le rêve s'estompe. Otello est totalement brisé par la merveilleuse beauté de ce récit, combinée à la noirceur mensongère de son contenu: il répond à mi-voix ("Oh! mostruosa colpa" "Oh! monstrueuse faute"); sonné, il contemple plus qu'il ne condamne.

Lorsque Iago lui offre la preuve du mouchoir (premier gage d'amour offert par Otello à Desdemona), qu'il a "vu" dans la main de Cassio, la voix d'Otello retrouve toute sa violence (*ff*: "Ah ! mille vite gli donasse Iddio!" "Ah ! que Dieu lui donne mille vies!") et des groupes de triolets s'emparent une fois de plus de l'accompagnement jusqu'à ce qu'Otello y mette fin par son cri insensé trois fois répété ("Ah! sangue! sangue! sangue!" "Ah! vengeance! vengeance! vengeance!"). Tombant à genoux, il jure devant Dieu de se venger. Sa partie commence par une même note répétée, richement brodée par les vents. Iago l'empêche de se relever, se met à genoux et jure à son tour. C'est seulement lorsqu'ils chantent ensemble (procurant une conclusion héroïque à cet acte) que l'on s'aperçoit que c'est Iago qui a la mélodie – c'est réellement lui qui "mène la danse" tandis qu'Otello assure à la ligne mélodique un accompagnement contrapuntique.

Le contrepoint le plus complexe de la partition ouvre l'Acte III de manière mystérieuse, et Verdi évoque spécifiquement à la fois Iago et la jalousie. La musique atteint un point culminant puis se calme. Après l'annonce par le héraut de l'arrivée des ambassadeurs vénitiens, l'unique mot

prononcé par Otello, "Continue", s'adresse ainsi à la fois à Iago et à la jalousie dans son esprit obnubilé. Cet acte verra les soupçons torturés d'Otello se transformer en (apparence de) faits, car Iago se promet d'attirer Cassio et de l'amener à révéler sa culpabilité. Juste avant de partir, Iago exaspère sa victime par une allusion au "mouchoir".

L'entrée de Desdemona confère une beauté lyrique à cette scène, et tout au long de leur échange l'affection de la jeune femme contraste avec la courtoisie tendue d'Otello. De nouveau, elle plaide la cause de Cassio tandis qu'Otello réclame encore et encore le mouchoir, montant chaque fois le ton. Avec une dangereuse insensibilité, elle essaie de ramener la conversation à Cassio. Brusquement, Otello perd tout contrôle de lui-même et la met au défi de jurer de son innocence. Ses protestations de fidélité (exprimées avec le plus profond sentiment) le mettent en fureur. Soudain (comme le précisent les indications de Verdi), Otello passe de la rage à une ironie glaciale bien plus terrifiante encore. Citant la musique de Desdemona, il la raccompagne à la porte, l'insulte brutalement en lui disant qu'il la prenait pour "cette vile courtisane qu'est l'épouse d'Otello", et la jette dehors.

Complètement brisé à présent, il commence l'air le plus douloureux de tout l'opéra sur une même note sombrement répétée. (Remarquez avec quelle fréquence les airs de cet opéra débutent sur une même note répétée... et comme leur puissance expressive est infiniment supérieure à celle des mélodies belcantistes traditionnelles.) De son côté, l'orchestre poursuit obstinément un même petit motif mélodique au travers de ses diverses tournures harmoniques et contrapuntiques. Chaque nouvelle mutation donne une puissance psychologique nouvelle à la description de la détresse sans fond d'Otello et de ses efforts sans espoir pour échapper à son tourment. Ce numéro est peut-être la plus grande réussite tragique de Verdi: nulle part est-il aussi wagnérien de par l'éloquence de son orchestre, nulle part est-il aussi profondément verdien, car, juste au bon moment, la voix commence à s'élever et peu à peu impose une lente mélodie lyrique pour l'évocation par Otello de l'éclipse de son soleil, du sourire qui a été la plus grande joie de son existence. Au moment même où il maudit son sort et déclare qu'à la preuve succédera la mort, Iago revient: Cassio est là. La rapidité de l'action est telle que la ligne vocale d'Otello se maintient presque sans changement et mène à un bref

échange de paroles, avant qu’Otello se cache pour écouter et observer.

Pendant la scène qui suit, Iago parle à Cassio de sa maîtresse Bianca. Leur conversation est égrillarde et plutôt gaie, et Otello – qui ne l’entend que par bribes – pense naturellement qu’il est question de Desdemona. Lorsque Cassio, perplexe, montre à Iago le mouchoir mystérieux qu’il a trouvé dans ses appartements, Iago l’agite ostensiblement en tous sens: Otello le voit et croit tenir la “preuve” qu’il réclamait. La musique que compose ici Verdi est d’une grande variété et d’une délicatesse sans précédent. C’est le genre d’écriture que l’on trouve en abondance dans son dernier opéra, *Falstaff* (écrit cinq ans après *Otello*). Puis une tonalité plus formelle s’impose avec les sonneries d’une trompette solo; d’autres lui répondent, et un coup de canon annonce l’arrivée de l’ambassade. Iago éloigne rapidement Cassio. Tandis que les Chypriotes acclament les ambassadeurs vénitiens, Otello, à la suggestion de Iago, décide d’étrangler Desdemona. Iago se chargera de tuer Cassio, et Otello le promet au rang de capitaine.

La grande scène d’apparat qui suit a toute la brillance de celle de l’autodafé dans *Don Carlos* ou de la scène du Triomphe dans *Aida*. (Il est

intéressant de noter que lorsque Verdi prépara *Otello* pour la production parisienne de 1894, c’est ici qu’il inséra le ballet exigé par les conventions de l’opéra français. Quoique superflu sur le plan dramatique, il établit un parallèle avec l’organisation d’*Aida*, contient des pages scintillantes, et les six mesures d’invocation à Allah sont d’une grande force dramatique.) Les instructions reçues par Otello le rappellent à Venise: Cassio doit lui succéder comme gouverneur de Chypre! Poussé à bout lorsqu’il entend Desdemona dire à Iago qu’elle espère voir Cassio et Otello se réconcilier, Otello insulte publiquement son épouse et la frappe, sous les regards horrifiés de l’assistance (“A terra!... e piangi!...” “A terre!... et pleure!...”). L’exquise lamentation de Desdemona s’épanouit en un vaste ensemble concertant, statique, mais dont les dimensions et l’instrumentation éclatante font vivement ressortir la sombre coloration orchestrale du dernier acte. Pendant cet ensemble, Iago pousse Otello à la vengeance et convainc Roderigo qu’il doit tuer Cassio ou définitivement renoncer à Desdemona. Une pause survient, et Otello s’en prend à la foule en lui commandant de s’éloigner. Quand Desdemona essaie de le réconforter, il la maudit avant de s’effondrer, évanoui. Tandis

que Iago exulte, la foule s’éloigne en acclamant Otello et le Lion de Venise. Iago (“avec un geste d’horrible triomphe”, précise Verdi) désigne la figure prostrée d’Otello et répond avec un rire méprisant: “Ecco il Leone!” (“Le voilà, votre Lion!”). Un dernier cri ironique de la foule: “Vive Otello!”, et le rideau tombe. Verdi apporta des modifications substantielles à ce finale lors de la création à Paris (en 1894: version entendue ici) afin de mieux mettre en relief les paroles de Iago qui, en dépit de ses efforts et de ceux des interprètes, n’étaient pas suffisamment audibles à son goût dans la partition originale.

Après les remous des courants contraires, la rapidité d’action et le spectacle public des précédents actes, le **Quatrième Acte** est d’un contenu simple: toute l’action repose sur la symétrie des deux morts. La tonalité est noire, intime. Doux et mélancolique, un cor anglais essaie (en un sombre *sol* dièse mineur) d’élever une phrase mélodique, mais elle s’évanouit dans l’abîme. Plus tard, cette phrase s’accompagnera de paroles lorsque Desdemona chantera la chanson du Saule, mais ici elle est ponctuée par les flûtes et suivie de la sonorité à vide des clarinettes. Développée en trente mesures d’une écriture chromatique et contrapuntique, elle paraît retarder

indéfiniment le lever du rideau, qui nous révèle Emilia aidant Desdemona à se préparer pour la nuit. Les pensées de Desdemona sont obsessivement tournées vers la mort, et une chanson que chantait une servante de sa mère lui revient sans cesse à l’esprit (“Mia madre aveva una povera ancella” “Ma mère avait une pauvre servante”). Plaintivement accompagnée par le cor anglais, elle chante couplet après couplet de cette chanson du Saule. Il s’en dégage un sentiment de répétition circulaire oppressant mais sans monotonie, car Verdi prend soin de varier les répétitions par quelques touches comme la description des volettements des oiseaux (“Scendean l’angelli a vol dai rami cupi” “Les oiseaux descendaient en voletant depuis les plus hautes branches”), ou d’une fenêtre claquant soudain au vent de manière alarmante. Sur de lourds accords menaçants, Desdemona souhaite bonne nuit à sa suivante puis, momentanément prise de panique, l’embrasse et lui dit adieu. Le motif précédent se glisse à nouveau, troublant. Son ondulation chromatique se transforme en un la bémol majeur plus serein lorsque Desdemona s’agenouille devant une image de la Vierge et dit sa prière. Le texte de cet Ave Maria est la dernière facette du portrait tracé par l’opéra de sa personnalité. Sa supplique se

charge de ferveur puis cesse avant qu'elle ne gagne son lit et s'endorme.

La sombre couleur orchestrale s'assombrit encore lorsqu'Otello entre dans la pièce. Verdi utilise les seules contrebasses – toutes, sauf la première, munies de sourdines. Otello l'embrasse à trois reprises. À peine le choc du souvenir s'est-il emparé de cette grand envolée qui nous ramène au duo de l'acte I, qu'elle s'évanouit (privée de sa cadence) à l'instant où Desdemona s'éveille. Otello étouffe sa femme. Emilia n'entre dans la chambre que pour entendre sa maîtresse, mourante, prétendre au suicide afin de protéger Otello: "Et dis à mon Seigneur que jamais je ne l'ai trompé... dans la mort je l'aime... Adieu..." Furieux, Otello l'accuse de mensonge et reconnaît sa culpabilité: "Oh, menteuse! C'est moi qui l'ai tuée."

Par ses cris, Emilia attire sur scène les autres personnages... uniquement pour leur révéler la trahison de Iago et la crédulité d'Otello. Lodovico désarme le Maure. Calmement, Otello demande que nul ne le craigne: ("Life's weary journey has reached its end. Oh! Glory! Otello's done!") (Me voici au bout du chemin. Oh! Gloire! Otello n'est plus.) Ce passage remplace les dix-neuf vers miraculeux de Shakespeare ("Soft you, a word or two before

you go" "Paix, messieurs, un mot ou deux avant que vous ne partiez"), au cours desquels Othello se considère tour à tour du point de vue de son propre accusateur, de son propre avocat, de son juge et de son bourreau. En des vers bouleversants (renvoyant à un passage antérieur de la pièce), il prend congé de son épouse innocente et morte, et se poignarde avec l'arme qu'il tenait cachée. Au troisième baiser, Otello meurt (Verdi place la dernière syllabe sous un silence: pas de note déterminée, simplement le son de la parole qui expire) et cette fois la cadence (et l'opéra) est menée à son terme.

La pleine dimension tragique de cette conclusion dépasse largement sa substance dramatico-musicale immédiate. On a beaucoup écrit sur le réemploi par Verdi de la musique du duo d'amour, et son effet est ici précisément tragique parce qu'il fait coïncider l'orgueil démesuré et fatal d'Otello à la fois avec le moment de son plus grand épanouissement (son amour pour Desdemona) et avec celui de sa destruction. Sa force irrésistible ne peut simplement s'expliquer par l'emploi par Verdi d'un thème de réminiscence (lieu commun de l'opéra italien et des propres œuvres de Verdi, présent par exemple dans *La Force du destin* et dans *Aida*). Elle ne

découle pas non plus de la simple intensité injectée par Verdi (ce thème est moins simple qu'il n'y paraît et rendu un peu plus complexe encore par le recours au même procédé au début de l'acte III). En revenant à l'acte I au moment où la tragédie s'achève, Verdi impose une puissance cyclique à l'ensemble de l'œuvre et nous force à réexaminer le début à la lumière de la fin. Pourquoi procéder ainsi ? La réponse est à la fois subtile et shakespearienne.

Shakespeare assimile souvent une image particulière à un motif dramatique essentiel. Dans *Othello*, Iago est assimilé au Turc, et l'art de la guerre (occupation d'Othello) à la bataille intérieure qui le détruira. Shakespeare joue pour la première fois avec ces motifs à la scène 1 de l'acte II (Un port maritime à Chypre. Un espace dégagé près du quai). Il a fallu près de quarante pages à un bon critique pour explorer les implications de cette scène (Harold G. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, The University of Chicago Press, 1951). Judicieusement, le professeur l'appelle le "sixième acte d'*Othello*" et en décrit "la musique silencieuse": cette activité de surface qui ne révèle son noyau métaphysique qu'une fois la tragédie arrivée à son terme. Verdi va droit à ce violent noyau d'obscurité; la tempête (non pas qui s'achève mais à venir) amène

Otello qui ordonne: "Réjouissez-vous! L'orgueil turc est enseveli en mer; la gloire nous en revient ainsi qu'au Ciel! Après nos armes, l'ouragan l'a annihilé." Rien de tel, disait Shakespeare; et Verdi dit de même encore plus directement: la tempête ne fait que commencer, et ce "Turc" n'est ni enseveli, ni annihilé. C'est la dynamo structurelle qui meut la tragédie – ce qui explique que Verdi ait accordé une telle place à la tempête initiale. Rien de commun avec ces jolies parenthèses orchestrales qui sont pléthore dans le répertoire opératique. Lorsqu'elle semble enfin s'être calmée (cet immense "*decrecendo*" occupant tout l'acte), nous connaissons les personnages d'une tragédie qui ne fait que commencer (avec ces trois baisers). Un poète plus tardif devait affirmer (citant lui-même la devise d'une reine tragique): "Dans mon commencement est ma fin"; il est temps que le rideau se lève sur le plus grand drame verdien.

Benedict Sarnaker

Traduction: Josée Bégaud

L'ambition de **Charles Craig**, né en 1919, fut toujours de chanter, mais les besoins familiaux firent qu'il dut exercer d'autres emplois avant de joindre l'armée au début de la Seconde

Guerre mondiale. En 1947, il entra dans le chœur du Royal Opera de Covent Garden. Il fit ses débuts en concert à Londres avec Sir Thomas Beecham en 1952, et l'année suivante, il entra au Carl Rosa Opera en qualité de ténor principal, faisant ses débuts dans le rôle de Rodolfo (*La bohème*); il chanta également le rôle de Des Grieux (*Manon Lescaut* de Puccini) et le rôle titre lors de la première anglaise de *Benvenuto Cellini* de Berlioz. Charles Craig entra au Sadler's Wells Opera en 1956, et y chanta entre autres les rôles de Samson, d'Andrea Chénier et du Prince dans la première production anglaise de *Rusalka* de Dvořák. Il chanta pour la première fois comme principal à Covent Garden en 1959 dans le rôle de Pinkerton (*Madama Butterfly*), et y incarna d'autres rôles tels que Pollione (*Norma*) et Des Grieux. Il fut invité à se produire dans de nombreux théâtres lyriques importants en Europe, en Amérique du Nord et du Sud. Il fut particulièrement recherché comme interprète d'Otello, un rôle qu'il chanta à Berlin, à La Scala de Milan et au Palais des doges, avant de le chanter à Covent Garden et à l'English National Opera (dans la production de Jonathan Miller qui est enregistrée ici). Charles Craig est mort en janvier 1997.

Rosalind Plowright a mené une carrière particulièrement remarquable. Elle fit ses études au Royal Northern College of Music de Manchester et au London Opera Centre, et obtint une bourse de la Peter Moores Foundation et une bourse Peter Stuyvesant. Son enregistrement de 1984 de Leonora (*Il trovatore*) avec Plácido Domingo, sous la direction de Carlo Maria Giulini, fut sélectionné pour un *Grammy Award*. Toujours en 1984, elle fit ses débuts au Royal Opera de Covent Garden dans le rôle de Maddalena (*Andrea Chénier*) avec Jose Carreras, et dans *Aida* avec Luciano Pavarotti.

Rosalind Plowright s'est produite dans la plupart des grands théâtres lyriques du monde entier dans des rôles tels que Suor Angelica (La Scala, Milan), Leonora dans *Il trovatore* (Vérone), Stiffelio (La Fenice, Venise), Ariadne et Medea (Opéra Bastille, Paris), Desdemona et Amelia (Staatsoper de Vienne), Madama Butterfly (Houston Grand Opera), et Santuzza (Staatsoper de Berlin). A l'English National Opera, Rosalind Plowright a chanté dans *Otello*, *Mary Stuart*, *The Turn of the Screw* (pour lequel elle remporta un *Olivier Award*), et *Il tabarro* de Puccini. Parmi ses enregistrements figurent *Elijah* de Mendelssohn (pour Chandos), *Les Contes*

d'*Hoffmann* d'Offenbach, *Il trovatore* de Verdi, et (pour Chandos et la Peter Moores Foundation) *Mary Stuart*.

Neil Howlett remporta la Kathleen Ferrier Memorial Scholarship pendant ses études à l'Université de Cambridge. Il poursuivit ensuite sa formation à Vienne, à Milan et à Stuttgart. Sa brillante carrière internationale compte des prestations avec l'English Opera Group (avec Benjamin Britten), au Royal Opera de Covent Garden, au Welsh National Opera, au Scottish Opera, et à l'English National Opera où il fut premier baryton pendant quinze ans. Il a chanté plus de quatre-vingts rôles, couvrant un vaste répertoire; des exemples notables sont Scarpia, Iago, Macbeth, Boccanegra, Renato, Amfortas, Golaud, Almaviva et Jokanaan. Sur le plan international, Neil Howlett s'est produit en Italie, en France, en Allemagne, en Scandinavie, en Amérique du Sud et aux Etats-Unis. Dans son répertoire de concert, il a chanté avec tous les grands orchestres britanniques.

Neil Howlett fut professeur à la Guildhall School of Music and Drama de Londres de 1974 à 1992, date à laquelle il fut nommé Head of Vocal Studies, et plus tard Director of

Repertoire Studies au Royal Northern College of Music de Manchester. Depuis 1998, il a été salué par la critique pour ses interprétations de Wotan/Wanderer. Il continue à donner des leçons privées à Londres et dans le comté du Lincolnshire.

D'origine italienne, **Bonaventura Bottone** est né en Angleterre, et a étudié à la Royal Academy of Music de Londres. Au Royal Opera de Covent Garden, il a incarné le Chanteur italien (*Der Rosenkavalier*), Raoul (*Les Huguenots*), Cassio (*Otello*) et le Comte Libenskof (*Il viaggio a Reims*). A l'English National Opera, il a été le créateur de vingt rôles importants, incluant Rodolfo (*La bohème*), Faust (*La Damnation de Faust*), le Duc (*Rigoletto*) et Lensky (*Eugène Onéguine*). Il s'est également produit au Glyndebourne Festival Opera, à l'Opera North, au Scottish Opera et au Welsh Opera dans des rôles tels que Loge (*Das Rheingold*), Turiddu (*Cavalleria rusticana*), Alfredo (*La traviata*) et Fernando (*La favorita*).

A l'étranger, Bonaventura Bottone s'est produit à l'Opéra d'Etat de Bavière, à la Houston Opera House, au Metropolitan Opera de New York, au Lyric Opera de Chicago, à l'Opéra Bastille de Paris, et au

Nouvel Opéra d'Israël. Il a chanté en concert en Allemagne, en Norvège, en Pologne et en Espagne. Parmi ses enregistrements figurent *The Mikado*, *Street Scene* de Kurt Weil et *Hugh the Drover* de Vaughan Williams.

Shelagh Squires fit ses études à la Guildhall School of Music and Drama de Londres. Elle s'est produite à l'English National Opera, au Festival de Glyndebourne et avec le Glyndebourne Touring Opera, et au Metropolitan Opera de New York entre autres. Elle a également chanté au Festival international de Bergen, à Vienne et au Japon. Son vaste répertoire inclut Ottavia (*L'incoronazione di Poppea*), Marcellina (*Le nozze di Figaro*), Ulrica (*Un ballo in maschera*), Magdalena (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*), Herodias (*Salome*), Annina (*Der Rosenkavalier*), Adelaïde (*Arabella*), Martha (*Faust*), la Sorcière (*Rusalka*) et Filipyevna (*Eugène Onéguine*). Parmi les enregistrements de Shelagh Squires figurent *La traviata*, *Das Rheingold* et *Götterdämmerung* (tous pour Chandos et la Peter Moores Foundation).

Stuart Kale est reconnu dans le monde entier comme l'un des acteurs chanteurs les plus exceptionnels du monde de l'opéra, et ses rôles

couvrent un très vaste répertoire allant de Monteverdi jusqu'à Messiaen. Il commença sa carrière au Welsh National Opera avant d'entrer à l'English National Opera où il resta pendant huit ans, chantant des rôles tels que Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*), Michael (*Giulietta* de Martinů), Alfred (*Die Fledermaus*) et Nanki-Poo dans la production de Jonathan Miller du *Mikado*.

Parmi ses engagements importants, on citera le Grand Prêtre (*Idomeneo*) au Royal Opera de Covent Garden, Hauptmann (*Wozzeck*) à Nancy, à San Francisco et à l'Opéra du Rhin à Strasbourg, Shuisky (*Boris Goudonov*) à Strasbourg, Bordeaux et Montpellier, Peter Quint (*The Turn of the Screw*) pour la tournée 1990 en Russie de l'English National Opera, Zinoviev (*Lady Macbeth de Mtsensk*) à Toulouse et à Marseille, les rôles des trois ténors dans *Lulu* au Théâtre du Châtelet à Paris. Parmi ses enregistrements figurent Shuisky dans *Boris Goudonov* (extraits) et Goro (*Madama Butterfly*) pour Chandos et la Peter Moores Foundation.

Malcolm Rivers fit ses études au Royal College of Music de Londres, et prit des leçons aux USA avec George London, et à Londres avec Josephine Veasey. Il fit ses débuts dans

The Beggar's Opera de John Gay avec la Royal Shakespeare Company.

Il s'est produit dans de nombreuses salles lyriques internationales, notamment au Royal Opera de Covent Garden, au Teatro San Carlo de Naples, au Théâtre de La Monnaie de Bruxelles, dans les festivals d'Aldeburgh et d'Edimbourg, au Los Angeles Music Theatre, au Teatro Comunale de Florence, à La Fenice de Venise, au Staatsoper de Vienne, au Houston Grand Opera, et à Drottningholm. Parmi les très nombreux rôles de son répertoire figurent Scarpia (*Tosca*), le Commandant (*La Maison des morts*), et Eisenhardt (*Die Soldaten*) à l'English National Opera; le Juge (*Sweeney Todd*) à l'Opera North; Geistergebot (*Die Frau ohne Schatten*) et Gunter (*Götterdämmerung*) à l'Opéra de Marseille; Alberich (*Das Rheingold*) à l'Arizona Opera; et Sacristan (*Tosca*) à l'Opéra de Bordeaux.

La discographie de Malcolm Rivers compte *Pacific Overtures*, *La fanciulla del West*, *The Pirates of Penzance* et *The Mikado*.

Salué autant par la critique que par le public, l'Orchestre de l'English National Opera, avec Barry Griffiths comme premier violon, s'est vu décerner ces dernières années plusieurs prix prestigieux comme le Prix de la Royal

Philharmonic Society et un *Olivier Award* pour sa contribution exceptionnelle au monde lyrique. L'Orchestre est au cœur de la vie artistique de la Compagnie et outre les représentations lyriques au Coliseum à Londres, il se produit également en concert. De plus, de nombreux membres de l'Orchestre participent au Projet Baylis mis sur pied par la branche de la Compagnie chargée de l'éducation ainsi qu'au développement de nouveaux opéra avec l'English National Opera Studio, comme *The Silver Tassie* de Mark-Anthony Turnage dont la création mondiale eut lieu en février 2000. L'Orchestre a participé à de nombreux enregistrements, comme, pour Chandos, en collaboration avec la Peter Moores Foundation, *Ermani*, *Maria Stuarda*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Rigoletto* (dans la mise en scène de Jonathan Miller), *La traviata* et *Werther*.

Le Chœur de l'English National Opera est l'un des plus beaux atouts de cette compagnie lyrique. Remarquable autant pour la puissance de son chant que l'intensité de son jeu, cet ensemble a enthousiasmé le public dans d'innombrables productions de l'English National Opera. Ces soixante-huit choristes, riches d'une vaste expérience et d'une

multitude de talents, marquent de leur sceau toutes les représentations auxquelles ils participent. Le Chœur a triomphé entre autres dans *Guerre et paix* de Prokofiev, *Lady Macbeth de Mzensk* de Chostakovitch, *Billy Budd* et *Peter Grimes* de Britten, *Boris Godounov* de Moussorgsky, *Carmen* de Bizet et *Otello* de Verdi. Ils ont enregistré pour Chandos, en collaboration avec la Peter Moores Foundation, le cycle du *Ring* dirigé par Sir Reginald Goodall, *Ernani*, *Maria Stuarda*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Rigoletto* (dans la mise en scène de Jonathan Miller) et *La traviata*.

Mark Elder, qui a été fait Commandeur de l'Empire Britannique (CBE) en 1989, a tenu des postes prestigieux en Grande-Bretagne et à l'étranger. Ainsi, il fut directeur de l'English National Opera (1979–1993), directeur musical du Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra aux Etats-Unis (1989–1994), et chef principal invité du City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (1992–1995), un poste qu'il a également assuré à la tête du BBC Symphony Orchestra et des London Mozart Players. En septembre 2000, il deviendra le directeur musical du Hallé Orchestra.

Mark Elder dirige régulièrement de grands

orchestres en Europe et en Amérique du Nord, notamment le Chicago Symphony Orchestra, l'Orchestre Royal du Concertgebouw, le Los Angeles Philharmonic, l'Orchestre de Paris et l'Orchestre de la Radio d'Allemagne du Nord.

En Grande-Bretagne, il collabore étroitement avec le London Philharmonic Orchestra et l'Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, et il se produit tous les ans dans le cadre des Promenade Concerts de la BBC.

Mark Elder dirige régulièrement dans des salles lyriques internationales aussi importantes que celles du Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, du Metropolitan Opera de New York, de l'Opéra national de Paris-Bastille, du Lyric Opera de Chicago, du Glyndebourne Festival Opera et de l'Opéra d'Etat de Bavière. Il a également dirigé au Festival de Bayreuth, et à Amsterdam, Genève, Berlin et Sydney.

Avec l'English National Opera, Mark Elder a effectué des tournées triomphales aux USA (en passant par le Metropolitan Opera) et en Russie (notamment au Bolchoï à Moscou et au Théâtre Mariinski de Saint-Petersbourg). Très récemment, il a dirigé des productions de *Mefistofele* (Boito) et d'*Otello* au Metropolitan Opera de New York.



Stuart Kale as Roderigo, Bonaventura Bottone as Cassio and Neil Howlett as Iago

Giuseppe Verdi: Otello

Nota: per comodità, in quest'articolo, *Othello* indica la tragedia di Shakespeare e *Otello* l'opera di Verdi. I riferimenti al titolo saranno indicati come segue: *Othello* (Shakespeare), *Otello* (Verdi).

Otello: Dramma e musica

Dopo trent'anni di duro lavoro (i cosiddetti "anni di galera") nel rispetto delle convenzioni e al servizio del pubblico dell'opera italiana, Verdi si ritirò. Aveva raggiunto la sicurezza economica e preferì dedicarsi all'agricoltura e alla beneficenza piuttosto che proseguire nell'ingrato sforzo che comportava la produzione operistica. Nel suo volume dal titolo *The Man Verdi*, Frank Walker racconta che i suoi amici e il suo abile editore, Giulio Ricordi, dovettero convincerlo a superare la sua sfiducia nei confronti di Arrigo Boito; che entrambi collaborarono alla realizzazione di *Otello* e *Falstaff* (oltre che alla revisione di *Simon Boccanegra*); e che Boito divenne un caro amico, poi una delle poche persone di fiducia di Verdi e infine un figlio adottivo e fu presente al capezzale del compositore al momento della sua morte. I frutti di questa

collaborazione sono stati abbondantemente esaltati e, in verità, *Otello* uguaglia il dramma omonimo di Shakespeare per passione e sentimento. Inoltre, mentre Shakespeare (per rendere più credibili le suppliche di Desdemona a favore di Cassio) è obbligato ad ampliare la sua tragedia, l'opera adotta stili musicali contrastanti per raggiungere un risultato simile, ma più energico e succinto rispetto al suo modello.

Il primo atto dell'*Othello* di Shakespeare è ambientato a Venezia e descrive l'amore di Desdemona per il generale moro, da lei sposato in segreto. Questo scatena le ire del padre di lei, che fa ricorso al Doge e al Consiglio; in questa sede si rivela la sincerità del loro amore. L'ira del padre si placa e *Othello* viene inviato come governatore a Cipro per difendere la colonia veneziana dalle incursioni dei Turchi. Boito e Verdi non utilizzano queste vicende (abbreviando in tal modo un dramma molto lungo e lasciando tempo alla musica), ma ne conservano la funzione: stabilire la personalità dei personaggi principali e i rapporti tra di loro. Il primo atto dell'opera è composto da una serie di brani

lirici tradizionali (tempesta, peana alla vittoria, coro intorno al fuoco, brindisi, duetto d'amore), ma strettamente collegati, in maniera meno convenzionale, dallo svolgersi dell'azione e da un tessuto musicale ininterrotto.

Non c'è ouverture, nemmeno un preludio. Il sipario si alza su un orribile frastuono: sulla scena si scatena una violenta tempesta. L'effetto è caotico: nel buio, tra la pioggia, si intuiscono i movimenti delle persone, rivelate a sprazzi dalla luce delle saette, mentre i tuoni sono punteggiati da colpi di cannone (tutti questi elementi scenici sono orchestrati con precisione da Verdi e inseriti meticolosamente nella partitura). Si intravede brevemente la nave di *Otello*. Per un momento sembra sul punto di affondare e l'animazione di coloro che stanno a guardare fa da contrappunto al disordine con un grande inno al cielo, "con gesti di spavento e di supplicazione e rivolti verso lo spaldo", come recitano le istruzioni di scena. Nessun'altra opera italiana descrive una tempesta in maniera altrettanto potente ed esattamente orchestrata. Di tempeste se ne erano viste in abbondanza. Servivano a sospendere l'azione, innalzare la tensione e dare all'orchestra un breve momento di gloria (uno splendido esempio si trova verso la fine

del *Barbiere di Siviglia* di Rossini), ma nessuna si scatena con altrettanta ferocia né si svolge con altrettanta violenza, e nessuna sottolinea l'atmosfera e l'azione in maniera altrettanto poderosa.

Poco dopo l'appello al soccorso della folla, incontriamo il primo dei tre protagonisti, Iago, che manifesta subito la sua malevolenza: "È infranto l'artimon!... L'alvo frenetico del mar sia la sua tomba!". Ma non ha finito di pronunciare la sua invettiva che il suo desiderio viene deluso: "È salvo!" ("She's safe now!") gridano i Ciprioti e pochi momenti dopo entra *Otello*. Non esiste un ingresso più bello né più difficile per un tenore. *Otello* deve correre sulla scena, pronunciando una frase sonora, eroica (che raggiunge il la alto) senza potersi aiutare neanche con una parola di recitativo. Con tre versi soltanto, *Otello* rivela inequivocabilmente la propria statura di comandante e condottiero. I Ciprioti reagiscono immediatamente con un coro gioioso: "Evviva *Otello*". Per quanto le parole di *Otello* siano in grado di suscitare tale entusiasmo nei suoi uomini, la sua esortazione all'esultanza per la sconfitta del nemico turco si carica di profonda ironia con lo svolgimento dell'opera. Terminato il festoso motivo, la tempesta si placa. Mentre il coro commenta

questo particolare (“Si calma la bufera” (“A calm succeeds the storm now”)— anche questo avrà un’eco ironica), si percepisce un meraviglioso alleggerimento della tensione. Verdi lo crea rilasciando un accordo grave discordante su tre semitoni adiacenti (do-do diesis-re) che era stato tenuto da un organo fin dall’inizio dell’opera.

In quest’atmosfera più serena, Iago si rivolge a Roderigo, un giovane veneziano disperatamente innamorato di Desdemona, e incoraggia la sua passione, assicurandogli che Desdemona si stancherà presto del marito. Iago confessa anche di odiare Cassio, elevato a un rango superiore al suo, e Otello che l’ha promosso, e termina una delle sue frasi untuose con un trillo che contrassegna molte delle sue espressioni caratteristiche. I due si allontanano verso il fondo della scena (e non li sentiamo più) mentre i Ciprioti accendono un falò e iniziano a cantare (“Fuoco di gioia” (“Flame of rejoicing”)). Questo è un altro luogo comune dell’opera italiana; Verdi definì questa (in una lettera a Giulio Ricordi) “la maledetta scena del fuoco”. Ciononostante, l’orchestrazione rapida e leggera del brano è gradevolissima e la sua funzione per quest’atto è indispensabile in quanto costituisce parte integrante di un’attenta transizione graduale

dall’esplosivo esordio al sereno duetto finale. Mentre il fuoco e il coro si indeboliscono, Roderigo e Iago si avvicinano a Cassio, il Capitano della Guardia. Iago invita i suoi compagni a bere. Cassio inizialmente si rifiuta (perché ha già bevuto), ma infine si lascia convincere a brindare a Otello e Desdemona. Quanto segue è un meraviglioso esempio del genio di Verdi, in grado di trasformare il vecchio in nuovo. Cassio esalta la bellezza e la bontà di Desdemona con parole che Iago utilizza per confermare a Roderigo di essere in presenza di un rivale; poi (dopo una brillante introduzione orchestrale) Iago si lancia nel “Brindisi”. Prima si rivolge a Cassio, che risponde a tono dal punto di vista poetico e musicale. La struttura si completa con il ritornello cantato da Iago (completo del suo trillo e di una serpentina scala cromatica) a cui fa eco il coro. Un breve inciso per Roderigo e il tutto viene ripetuto: stessa musica, ma questa volta l’orchestra è arricchita di trilli. Lo stesso inciso (“Un altro sorso e brillo egli è” (“One more glass and he’ll be drunk”)) viene seguito dalla terza strofa. L’accompagnamento viene sottolineato ulteriormente e così anche il dramma, perché anziché il tradizionale completamento dello schema, Cassio, ormai molto ubriaco, sbaglia l’attacco ed intona

troppo presto. Invece del ritornello previsto, il coro deride l’ubriaco, mentre Iago aizza Roderigo contro Cassio, che si aggira malfermo; presto scoppia una lite. Roderigo (su ordine di Iago) suona l’allarme e Montano (ex governatore, predecessore di Otello) si frappone tra loro e rimane ferito. La musica si fa convulsa; entra Otello (“Abbasso le spade!” (“Your swords cast before me”)), e con il suo recitativo (archi, punteggiati occasionalmente con violenza dai legni) calma il caos. Quando Otello esige di sapere come è iniziata la lite, Iago insinua che la colpa è di Cassio. Disturbata dal frastuono, entra Desdemona. Otello irosamente degrada Cassio. Poi dà brevi ordini che riportano la calma e quindi rimane solo sulla scena con Desdemona.

Introdotta da un violoncello solo con sordina sugli altri violoncelli divisi, inizia il superbo duetto d’amore. Intrecciando abilmente parole tratte dal primo e secondo atto della tragedia di Shakespeare, questo delicato, tenero, ardente e appassionato duetto ci conquista subito con la pura bellezza della sua melodia. Stabilisce inoltre completamente la natura e la profondità del rapporto tra Otello e Desdemona. Il culmine è il momento bellissimo e sensuale in cui Otello chiede per tre volte un bacio. Ritorneremo a questo

momento due volte durante l’ultimo atto: la tragedia è impernata su questi baci. Il ricordo di essi unifica l’opera e assume un particolare significato alla sua conclusione. Per il momento, con brillanti archi, arpa e legni, e un’eco finale delle sue frasi iniziali, il duetto conclude il gigantesco decrescendo costruito da Verdi per l’intero atto.

Il secondo atto inizia con un dialogo tra Cassio e Iago. L’introduzione orchestrale riccamente sviluppata si basa su un motivo legato a Iago: crudele all’inizio, poi dolce e incantevole, cambia per adeguarsi al suo stato d’animo durante questa scena. Dopo aver consigliato allo sconcolato Cassio di rivolgersi a Desdemona perché interceda presso Otello e gli faccia restituire la carica, Iago ordina alla sua vittima di andarsene (“vanne”); quindi ripete “vanne” in tono molto meno amichevole e su una violenta esplosione dell’orchestra intona il suo credo satanico. Per questo, Boito ampliò un minimo accenno in Shakespeare (dove Iago, avendo consigliato a Cassio di parlare della sua situazione a Desdemona, invoca la “Divinity of Hell” mentre progetta il suo prossimo stratagemma) in una corposa, nichilistica professione di malvagità. Dio è crudele; l’Uomo, creato a sua immagine e somiglianza, è malvagio, un burattino nelle mani della sorte.

Dopo la beffa della vita viene la morte... e poi? (*pp legato*). Il Nulla. Il paradiso è un'antica e inutile fola – e tutta la sezione degli ottoni emette un raggio di scherno. Nella composizione di Verdi (piena di trilli, con una gamma dinamica molto vasta, da *ppp* a *ff* e una enunciazione vocale per lo più declamatoria) quest'elettrizzante brano caratterizza Iago, che qui appare molto più malvagio di quanto non sia in Shakespeare, dove la sua motivazione si basa su voci e indottrinamento personale, non su convinzioni. Il fascino con cui continua la sua trama è agghiacciante. Mentre Cassio si avvicina a Desdemona, Iago lascia cadere casualmente parole di sospetto che vengono ascoltate da Otello. Poi ammonisce Otello a guardarsi dalla gelosia; bastano quattro frasi tranquille per iniettare il veleno.

Inizialmente Verdi avrebbe preferito intitolare l'opera Iago. In una lettera al suo amico Domenico Morelli, pittore napoletano, contestava l'opinione che quest'ultimo aveva del personaggio. Iago non è una figura meschina e malvagia. Ecco come lo vedeva il compositore:

...se io fossi un attore e dovessi interpretare Iago, lo farei alto, magro, con labbra sottili, occhi piccoli e ravvicinati al naso, come quelli di una scimmia, sopracciglia grandi, sfuggenti e la testa

appuntita; con un fare assente, noncurante, indifferente a tutto, spiritoso, parla bene e male quasi a cuor leggero e con un'aria di indifferenza, così che, se qualcuno dovesse rimproverargli "Quello che dici è vile!" potrebbe rispondere: "Davvero? Non mi sembrava... lasciamo perdere!"

Una figura come questa può ingannare chiunque, persino sua moglie, fino a un certo punto. Una piccola figura maliziosa suscita il sospetto di tutti e non inganna nessuno.

In lontananza, Cassio ha lasciato Desdemona circondata da Ciprioti che portano in dono fiori e frutta. Il linguaggio musicale adesso cambia e all'inizio appare strano. Alcuni critici hanno definito questa scena eccessivamente lunga e superflua dal punto di vista drammatico. Invece, con la sua aggiunta magicamente semplice di mandolino, chitarre e piccole cornamuse all'accompagnamento orchestrale, comunica la semplice bellezza di Desdemona attraverso gli occhi altrui, e la sua lunghezza è essenziale per rendere credibile l'azione successiva. Le qualità di Desdemona risplendono mentre la donna risponde all'omaggio con frasi elevate ("Splende il cielo" ("Heaven is smiling")): Otello è sopraffatto e persino Iago riconosce la sua bellezza, mentre si ripromette di

distruggerla. L'opportunità gli si presenta anche troppo presto. Desdemona si avvicina a Otello e delicatamente perora la causa di Cassio. Infuriato, il marito la respinge e allontana il fazzoletto che lei gli porge quando finge di avere mal di testa. Il loro dialogo cresce per diventare un magistrale quartetto, mentre Iago e sua moglie Emilia, l'ancella di Desdemona, si aggiungono alla coppia che si allontana. Iago strappa il fazzoletto a Emilia e le ordina il silenzio. Con esso creerà la prova per la tragedia. La raffinatezza di questo quartetto è straordinaria: le voci si mischiano e scambiano raggruppamento delicatamente, mentre l'accompagnamento le sostiene e allo stesso tempo disturba le loro linee languide con figurazione variata, dolcemente fragile. Quando Desdemona ed Emilia escono, quest'accompagnamento continua mentre Otello, sfibrato, si accascia su una sedia.

Ecco la scena equivalente in Shakespeare
...I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin.
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ...

[Lascero cadere questo fazzoletto in casa di Cassio, e lui lo troverà. Inezie leggere come l'aria/diventano per gli uomini gelosi prove indiscutibili.]

Iago si infila il fazzoletto nel farsetto. Quando si avvicina ad Otello, quest'ultimo ha un'esplosione d'ira. Il suo recitativo è talmente violento ("Tu? Indietro! fuggi!" ("You? Be careful! Leave me!")) da straripare (anziché condurre) nell'aria in cui il suo spirito si abbatte. Nonostante l'accelerazione del suo battito cardiaco e il tono marziale, alcune terzine come serpenti si insinuano, disturbandone la linearità e invadendo il canto di Otello, che raggiunge il culmine su un si bemolle alto. A questo punto Iago gli dice di calmarsi; gli archi (*ppp molto staccato e tremolo*) continuano con le terzine, mentre Otello esige una prova, una prova concreta. È talmente fuori di sé che prende Iago per la gola.

Con un grande sfoggio di riluttanza, Iago si assicura che il suo veleno giunga fino in fondo: ancora una volta con la sua voce più sensuale riferisce un sogno in cui Cassio descrive il suo amore per Desdemona e maledice il destino che l'ha concessa al Moro. Flauti e oboe molto piano si aggiungono agli archi mentre Iago 'cita' le parole di Cassio su un do alto ripetuto che sale cromaticamente al re ("Cauti vegliamo" ("We must be careful")) e poi (cromaticamente) scende di un'ottava. La sua successiva "citazione" (adesso oscurata da clarinetto, fagotto e corni) viene pronunciata con voce

vuota, tetra, nonostante il *dolcissimo* assegnato al ritmo di 6/8 sia scosso da delicati accenti sui ritmi più deboli e il sogno si dissolve. La meravigliosa bellezza di questa narrazione, abbinata alla cupa falsità del suo contenuto, distrugge completamente Otello: la sua risposta (“Oh! mostruosa colpa” (“Now I am sure she’s guilty!”)) è pronunciata piano: annientato, contempla piuttosto che condannare. Quando Iago gli offre la prova del fazzoletto (il primo pegno d’amore di Otello a Desdemona) “visto” in mano a Cassio, la violenza si riaccende nella voce di Otello (*ff*: “Ah! mille vite gli donasse Iddio!” (“Ah! Would that God had given him twenty thousand lives”)) e gruppi di terzine ancora una volta si impadroniscono dell’accompagnamento finché Otello lo interrompe con le sue tre folli esclamazioni (“Ah! sangue! sangue! sangue!” (“Ah! Vengeance, vengeance, vengeance!”)). Cadendo in ginocchio, giura vendetta al Cielo. La sua parte inizia su un tono uniforme riccamente ricamato dai fiati. Iago gli impedisce di alzarsi, si inginocchia anche lui e giura. Solo quando cantano insieme (in un’eroica conclusione di questo atto) ci rendiamo conto che è Iago a cantare la melodia. È lui, letteralmente, a intonare, mentre Otello lo accompagna contrappuntisticamente.

Il contrappunto più complesso della partitura apre misteriosamente l’Atto III e Verdi rievoca specificamente Iago e la gelosia. La musica raggiunge un culmine e poi si calma. Quando l’araldo annuncia gli ambasciatori veneziani, l’unica parola di Otello, “Continua” (“Continue”), è pertanto diretta sia a Iago sia alla gelosia nella cupa meditazione della sua mente. Quest’atto vedrà la tortura del dubbio diventare (apparentemente) realtà, perché Iago si impegna di portare Cassio e fargli rivelare la sua colpa. Poco prima di uscire, Iago suscita l’ira della sua vittima con la sua insinuazione: “il fazzoletto” (“the handkerchief”).

L’ingresso di Desdemona diffonde bellezza lirica sulla scena e attraverso il loro dialogo l’affetto di lei fa contrasto con la tesa cortesia di Otello. Ancora una volta la donna supplica per conto di Cassio e il marito le chiede il fazzoletto ripetutamente in frasi sempre ascendenti. Incautamente, Desdemona cerca di riportare la conversazione su Cassio. Otello perde bruscamente il controllo di sé e sfida la moglie a giurare la propria innocenza. Le sue proteste di fedeltà (espresse con il più profondo sentimento) lo mandano su tutte le furie. All’improvviso (secondo le indicazioni di Verdi) Otello passa dalla rabbia a una gelida

ironia, ben più terrificante. Citando la musica della donna, l’accompagna alla porta e brutalmente la insulta chiamandola “quella vil cortigiana che è la sposa d’Otello” (“Vile, Filthy harlot who’s the wife of Otello”). Poi la spinge fuori. Ormai completamente distrutto, Otello intona l’aria più dolorosa dell’opera su un tono cupo e uniforme. (Le arie di quest’opera spesso iniziano su un tono uniforme, ma sono molto più espressive rispetto a quelle tradizionali del belcanto). Nel frattempo, l’orchestra ripete insistentemente una piccola figura melodica attraverso una serie di avvolgimenti armonici e contrappuntistici. Ogni cambiamento conferisce nuova potenza psicologica alla descrizione dell’infelicità di Otello e dei suoi sforzi disperati per sfuggire al suo tormento. Questo brano è forse la più grande impresa tragica di Verdi. Solo qui il compositore è veramente wagneriano per il potere espressivo dell’orchestra e allo stesso tempo, profondamente se stesso, perché al momento giusto, la voce inizia ad innalzarsi e gradualmente si lancia in un lento motivo lirico, mentre Otello canta dell’eclissi del proprio sole, del sorriso che era stato la più grande gioia della sua vita. Proprio quando maledice il suo destino e dichiara che alla

prova seguirà la morte, ritorna Iago: è arrivato Cassio. La rapidità dell’azione è tale che il motivo di Otello prosegue quasi immutato e conduce a un breve scambio di parole, dopo di che Otello si nasconde per ascoltare e osservare.

Durante la scena seguente, Iago parla a Cassio di Bianca (l’amante di quest’ultimo). La loro conversazione è alquanto scurrile e piuttosto gioviale. Otello, che riesce ad udire solo a tratti, naturalmente crede che si riferiscano a Desdemona e quando Cassio, perplesso, mostra a Iago il misterioso fazzoletto che ha trovato nelle sue stanze, Iago lo agita apposta. Otello lo vede: è la “prova”. La musica composta da Verdi qui è molto variata e senza precedenti nella sua delicatezza. Questo tipo di tessitura pervade la sua ultima opera, *Falstaff* (composta cinque anni dopo *Otello*). Adesso si inserisce un nuovo tono, formale, mentre squilla una tromba solista; altre rispondono e un colpo di cannone annuncia l’arrivo dell’ambasciata. Iago si affretta a condurre via Cassio. Mentre i Ciprioti porgono il benvenuto agli ambasciatori veneziani, Otello, su consiglio di Iago, decide di strangolare Desdemona. Iago si incarica di pensare a Cassio e Otello lo promuove al grado di capitano.

La grandiosa scena cerimoniale che segue ha lo stesso splendore dell'autodafé nel *Don Carlo* o della scena del trionfo in *Aida*. (Cosa interessante, la musica del balletto in Otello fu aggiunta da Verdi per l'allestimento parigino del 1894, come richiedevano le convenzioni operistiche francesi. Per quanto sia superflua dal punto di vista drammatico, segue l'esempio di *Aida*, contiene musica brillante e le sei battute dell'invocazione ad Allah hanno grande forza drammatica). Otello riceve ordini che lo richiamano a Venezia e Cassio deve prendere il suo posto come Governatore di Cipro! Quando sente Desdemona dire a Iago che spera di vedere Cassio e Otello riconciliati, Otello va su tutte le furie, la insulta pubblicamente e, tra l'orrore degli astanti, l'aggredisce ("A terra!... e piangi!..." ("So lie there! And weep there!")). Dallo squisito lamento di Desdemona fiorisce in un ampio motivo concertato. Il suo effetto è statico, ma le sue dimensioni e la brillantezza della partitura fanno da vivace contrasto con la coloratura cupa dell'orchestrazione dell'ultimo atto. Inoltre, nel brano Iago incita Otello alla vendetta e convince Roderigo che deve uccidere Cassio o perdere ogni speranza di avere Desdemona. In una pausa dell'insieme, Otello si rivolge alla folla e ordina che si

disperda. Quando Desdemona cerca di confortarlo, la maledice e si accascia, svenuto. Mentre Iago gode del proprio trionfo, la folla si ritira cantando le lodi di Otello e del Leone di Venezia. Iago ("con un gesto d'orrendo trionfo" ("With a gesture of gloating triumph"), secondo le istruzioni di Verdi) indica il corpo prostrato di Otello ed esclama, beffardo: "Ecco il Leone!" ("There lies your Lion"). Con un ultimo, ironico augurio di "Lunga vita ad Otello!" da parte della folla, cala la tela. Verdi modificò notevolmente questo finale per le prime rappresentazioni parigine (1894 – come in questa registrazione) per dare rilievo alle parole di Iago che, nonostante i suoi sforzi e quelli degli interpreti, non erano risultate sufficientemente udibili per lui nella partitura originale.

Dopo gli scontri, la rapida azione e le scene davanti alla folla degli atti precedenti, il **Quarto atto** ha un contenuto semplice: l'intera vicenda si basa sulla simmetria delle due morti. Il tono è cupo e intimo. Tristemente e dolcemente (in un cupo sol diesis minore) un corno inglese cerca di sollevare una frase melodica, che affonda. In seguito la frase sarà accompagnata dalle parole nell'aria del salice di Desdemona, ma per il momento è punteggiata da flauti a cui rispondono sordamente dei

clarinetti. Dopo trenta battute di allungamento cromatico e contrappuntistico, sembra che il sipario si alzi dopo un'eternità. Emilia aiuta Desdemona a prepararsi per andare a letto. Desdemona pensa ossessivamente alla morte e non riesce a togliersi di mente una canzone che l'ancella di sua madre le cantava un tempo ("Mia madre aveva una povera ancella" ("My mother once had a poor little servant")). Con il lamentoso accompagnamento del corno inglese, canta ripetutamente questa canzone del salice. Il senso di ripetizione circolare è opprimente, ma non monotono, perché Verdi lo varia attentamente con particolari come la delicata descrizione degli uccelli in volo ("Scendean l'augelli a vol dai rami cupi" ("From branches high above sweet birds came flying")) o l'improvviso, spaventoso sbattere di una finestra nel vento. Su accordi pesanti, cupi, Desdemona augura la buona notte alla sua ancella, poi, presa momentaneamente dal panico, l'abbraccia e le dice addio. La preoccupante figura precedente riemerge. Le sue ondulazioni cromatiche passano a un più tranquillo la bemolle maggiore mentre Desdemona si inginocchia davanti a un'immagine della Madonna e prega. Il testo di questa Ave Maria è l'ultima sfaccettatura

del ritratto operistico della sua personalità. La supplica cresce e si trasforma in fervore, poi si spegne e la donna va a letto a dormire.

La fosca coloratura orchestrale adesso s'incupisce ancora di più mentre Otello entra nella stanza. È utilizzata solo la sezione orchestrale dei contrabbassi, tutti in sordina, tranne il primo contrabbasso. Otello la bacia tre volte. Quasi prima che ci si renda conto di essere in presenza di un riferimento al duetto del primo atto, la melodia si dissolve (priva della sua cadenza) mentre Desdemona si sveglia. Otello la strangola. Emilia entra in tempo per sentire le ultime parole della padrona, che dichiara di essersi suicidata per proteggere Otello: "Al mio Signor mi raccomanda... muoio innocente... Addio" ("And tell my Lord I never wronged him... in death I love him... farewell..."). Furiosamente, Otello l'accusa di mentire e ammette la sua colpa: "O mentitrice! io l'uccisi" ("Oh, she's a liar! I have killed her").

Alle grida di Emilia accorrono altri sulla scena, solo per rivelare il tradimento di Iago e la credulità di Otello. Lodovico disarmò il Moro. Otello, calmo, dice ai presenti di non aver paura di lui: "Ecco la fine del mio cammin. Oh! Gloria! Otello fu" ("Life's weary

journey has reached its end. Oh! Glory! Otello's done"). Questo sostituisce i diciannove miracolosi versi di Shakespeare ("Soft you, a word or two before you go"/Un momento, signori...) in cui Othello assume i ruoli di accusatore, difensore, giudice e giustiziere di se stesso. Con versi strazianti (che ritornano ad un brano precedente della tragedia) si scosta dalla moglie morta e si colpisce con un pugnale che aveva nascosto. Al terzo bacio Othello muore (Verdi stabilisce l'ultima sillaba sotto una pausa, senza nota) e questa volta la cadenza (e l'opera) è terminata.

La tragicità di questa conclusione nasce da ben più della sostanza musicale e drammatica immediata. Molto è stato scritto sul riutilizzo della musica del duetto d'amore, che qui ha un effetto tragico, in quanto colloca il fatale orgoglio di Othello nel momento del suo massimo compimento (il suo amore per Desdemona) e della sua distruzione. La sua travolgente forza non si può spiegare semplicemente con l'uso da parte di Verdi di un tema ricorrente (un espediente normale nella lirica italiana e nelle opere di Verdi, per esempio *La forza del Destino* o *Aida*) Né deriva dalla semplice intensità che le aggiunge Verdi (è più complessa di quanto sembri ed è ulteriormente complicata dall'altro uso dello

stesso espediente all'inizio dell'Atto III). Ritornando all'Atto I nel momento del tragico epilogo, Verdi crea una forza ciclica e ci obbliga a riesaminare l'inizio alla luce della fine. Perché? La risposta è profonda e shakespeariana.

Spesso Shakespeare identifica immagini particolari con temi drammatici fondamentali. In *Othello*, Iago è paragonato al Turco e la guerra (il mestiere di Othello) alla lotta interna che distruggerà il protagonista. Shakespeare gioca per la prima volta su questi motivi nell'Atto II, Scena I (Cipro: un luogo aperto presso il porto). Un buon critico riempì quasi quaranta pagine per spiegare i sottintesi di questa scena (Harold G. Goddard: *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, The University of Chicago Press, 1951). Sagacemente, il professor Goddard la definì il "Sesto Atto dell'*Othello*" e descrive la sua "musica silenziosa": quell'attività superficiale che rivela il suo nucleo metafisico solo quando la tragedia si è consumata. Verdi parte direttamente da questo violento nucleo tenebroso: la tempesta (non presente, ma a venire) da cui emerge Othello che ordina: "Esultate! L'orgoglio musulmano sepolto è in mar, nostra e del ciel è la gloria! Dopo l'armi vinse l'uragano". Non è vero, disse

Shakespeare; e ancor più direttamente, Verdi lo ribadisce: la tempesta è solo all'inizio e quel 'Musulmano' non è sepolto né distrutto. Questa è la dinamo strutturale che porta avanti la tragedia; ecco perché Verdi compone una grande tempesta iniziale, che nulla ha in comune con le belle parentesi orchestrali molto diffuse nel repertorio operistico. Quando sembra che si sia calmata (l'enorme 'decrecendo' che occupa un atto intero) ci accostiamo ai protagonisti di una tragedia che inizia solo allora (con i tre baci). Un poeta avrebbe detto (citando il motto di una sfortunata regina): "Nel mio inizio è la mia fine". Così si alza il sipario sul più grande dramma di Verdi.

Benedict Sarnaker

Traduzione: Emanuela Guastella

Nato nel 1919, **Charles Craig** aveva sempre sognato di cantare, ma alcuni motivi di famiglia l'obbligavano a impegnarsi in altri lavori prima di entrare nell'esercito allo scoppio della seconda Guerra mondiale. Nel 1947 entrava a far parte del coro del Covent Garden. Nel 1952 esordiva a Londra in alcuni concerti diretti a sir Thomas Beecham e l'anno dopo entrava come primo tenore presso il

teatro Carl Rosa, debuttando nelle vesti di Rodolfo (*La bohème*); interpretava anche il ruolo di Des Grieux (*Manon Lescaut* di Puccini) e quello di protagonista alla prima britannica del *Benvenuto Cellini* di Berlioz. Passava alla Sadler's Wells Opera nel 1956, interpretando, tra l'altro, i ruoli di Samson, Andrea Chénier e del principe nel primo allestimento britannico della *Rusalka* di Dvořák. Il suo esordio come primo tenore al Covent Garden risale al 1959 nelle vesti di Pinkerton (*Madama Butterfly*); altri ruoli comprendevano Pollione (*Norma*) e Des Grieux. Era ospite di molti dei più importanti teatri lirici d'Europa e dell'America del nord e del sud, ed era particolarmente richiesto come interprete di Othello, che eseguiva a Berlino, alla Scala di Milano e al Palazzo del Doge, prima di interpretarlo al Covent Garden e per l'English National Opera (nella produzione di Jonathan Miller che è registrata qui). Charles Craig è morto nel gennaio del 1997.

Rosalind Plowright vanta una carriera estremamente prestigiosa. Ha studiato presso il Royal Northern College of Music e il London Opera Centre, vincendo borse di studio della Peter Moores Foundation e di Peter Stuyvesant. Nel 1984, la sua registrazione di

Leonora (*Il trovatore*) con Plácido Domingo, per la direzione di Carlo Maria Giulini, veniva candidata a un premio *Grammy*. Nello stesso anno esordiva con la Royal Opera nel ruolo di Maddalena (*Andrea Chénier*) con José Carreras, e in quello di *Aida* con Luciano Pavarotti.

Rosalind Plowright si è esibita in moltissimi dei principali teatri lirici del mondo, in ruoli quali Suor Angelica (*La Scala*, Milano), Leonora nel *Trovatore* (Verona), nello *Stiffelio* (*La Fenice*, Venezia), nei ruoli di Ariadne e Medea (*Opéra Bastille*, Parigi), Desdemona e Amelia (*Staatsoper*, Vienna), Madama Butterfly (*Grand Opera* di Houston) e Santuzza (*Staatsoper*, Berlino). Per English National Opera si è esibita in *Otello*, *Maria Stuarda*, *The Turn of the Screw* (per cui ha vinto un premio *Olivier*) e *Il tabarro* di Puccini. La sua discografia comprende *Elijah* di Mendelssohn (per Chandos), *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* di Offenbach, *Il trovatore* di Verdi e (per Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation) *Mary Stuart*.

Neil Howlett ha vinto la Kathleen Ferrier Memorial Scholarship mentre frequentava l'università di Cambridge e in seguito ha studiato a Vienna, Milano e Stoccarda. La sua

carriera internazionale di successo comprende interpretazioni per l'English Opera Group (con Benjamin Britten), la Royal Opera, la Welsh National Opera, la Scottish Opera e l'English National Opera, dove è stato primo baritono per quindici anni. Ha interpretato più di ottanta ruoli, in un repertorio molto vasto; esempi importanti comprendono Scarpia, Iago, Macbeth, Boccanegra, Renato, Amfortas, Golaud, Almaviva e Jokanaan. All'estero è comparso in Italia, Francia, Germania, Scandinavia, Sud America e Stati Uniti e nel suo repertorio concertistico si è esibito con tutte le principali orchestre britanniche.

È stato docente presso la Guildhall School of Music and Drama dal 1974 al 1992, anno in cui è stato nominato Head of Vocal Studies e in seguito Director of Repertoire Studies presso il Royal Northern College of Music. Nel 1998 ha riscosso i consensi della critica per le sue interpretazioni di Wotan/Viandante. Continua a insegnare privatamente a Londra e nella regione del Lincolnshire.

Nato in Inghilterra da genitori italiani, Bonaventura Bottone ha studiato presso la Royal Academy of Music. Con la Royal Opera è comparso nei ruoli del Cantante italiano

(*Der Rosenkavalier*), Raoul (*Les Huguenots*), Cassio (*Otello*) e Conte Libenskof (*Il viaggio a Reims*), mentre per English National Opera ha creato venti ruoli importanti, tra cui Rodolfo (*La bohème*), Faust (*La Damnation de Faust*), il Duca (*Rigoletto*) e Lenski (*Eugenio Onieghin*). Ha cantato anche con la Glyndebourne Festival Opera, Opera North, Scottish Opera e Welsh National Opera in ruoli quali Loge (*Das Rheingold*), Turiddu (*Cavalleria rusticana*), Alfredo (*La traviata*) e Fernando (*La favorita*).

All'estero è comparso all'Opera di Monaco, all'Opera di Houston, alla Metropolitan Opera, alla Lyric Opera di Chicago, all'Opéra Bastille di Parigi e alla New Israeli Opera, ed ha partecipato a concerti in Germania, Norvegia, Polonia e Spagna. La discografia comprende *The Mikado*, *Street Scene* di Kurt Weill e *Hugh the Drover* di Vaughan Williams.

Shelagh Squires ha frequentato la Guildhall School of Music and Drama. È comparsa con l'English National Opera, la Festival Opera e la Touring Opera di Glyndebourne e la Metropolitan Opera di New York, tra l'altro; si è inoltre esibita al Festival internazionale di Bergen, a Vienna e in Giappone. Il suo vasto

repertorio comprende Ottavia (*L'incoronazione di Poppea*), Marcellina (*Le nozze di Figaro*), Ulrica (*Un ballo in maschera*), Magdalene (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*), Herodias (*Salomé*), Annina (*Der Rosenkavalier*), Adelaide (*Arabella*), Martha (*Faust*), la strega (*Rusalka*) e Filip'evna (*Eugenio Onieghin*). La discografia comprende *La traviata*, *The Rhinegold* e *Twilight of the Gods* (tutti per Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation).

Stuart Kale si è conquistato una fama a livello internazionale come uno dei più notevoli attori-cantanti del mondo della lirica. Vanta un repertorio enorme che riunisce ruoli di compositori che vanno da Monteverdi a Messiaen. Ha iniziato la sua carriera presso la Welsh National Opera prima di entrare all'English National Opera, dove è rimasto per otto anni, interpretando ruoli quali Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*), Michael (*Juiletta* di Martinů), Alfred (*Die Fledermaus*) e Nanki-Poo nell'allestimento di *The Mikado* per la regia di Jonathan Miller.

Tra i suoi impegni importanti vanno ricordati l'Alto sacerdote (*Idomeneo*) al Covent Garden, Hauptmann (*Wozzeck*) a Nancy, San Francisco e all'Opéra du Rhin di Strasburgo, Shuisky (*Boris Godunov*) a Strasburgo,

Bordeaux e Montpellier, Peter Quint (*The Turn of the Screw*) per la tournée russa del 1990 dell'ENO, Truffaldino (*L'Amour des trois oranges*) per l'ENO, Zinoviev (*Lady Macbeth*) a Tolosa e Marsiglia, i tre ruoli tenorili nella *Lulu* allo Châtelet. La discografia comprende Shuisky nel *Boris Godunov* (brani scelti) e Goro (*Madam Butterfly*) per Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation.

Malcolm Rivers ha studiato presso il Royal College of Music di Londra e si è perfezionato con George London negli Stati Uniti e con Josephine Veasey a Londra. Ha esordito in *The Beggar's Opera* di Gay con la Royal Shakespeare Company.

È apparso in numerosi teatri lirici internazionali, tra cui The Royal Opera Covent Garden, il San Carlo di Napoli, La Monnaie di Bruxelles, ha partecipato ai festival di Aldeburgh e di Edimburgo, è intervenuto al Los Angeles Music Theatre, al Teatro Comunale di Firenze, alla Fenice di Venezia, alla Staatsoper di Vienna, al Grand Opera di Houston, a Drottningholm. Tra i suoi numerosi ruoli vanno ricordati Scarpia (*Tosca*), il Comandante (*Da una casa di morti*) e Eisenhardt (*Die Soldaten*) per English National Opera; il Giudice (*Sweeney Todd*) per

Opera North; Geistergebot (*Die Frau ohne Schatten*) e Gunther (*Götterdämmerung*) per l'Opera di Marsiglia; Alberich (*Das Rheingold*) per l'Opera dell'Arizona e il Sagrestano (*Tosca*) per l'Opera di Bordeaux.

La discografia include *Pacific Overtures*, *La fanciulla del West*, *The Pirates of Penzance* e *The Mikado*.

Acclamata dalla critica e dal pubblico, l'**Orchestra di English National Opera**, primo violino Barry Griffiths, ha ricevuto negli ultimi anni diversi premi prestigiosi, tra cui il *Royal Philharmonic Society Music Award* e un *Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Opera*. L'Orchestra è al centro della vita artistica dell'Opera e, oltre a esibizioni liriche al Coliseum di Londra è stata anche vista sul palco in concerto. Inoltre molti dei musicisti partecipano al lavoro del Baylis Programme del dipartimento di educazione e "outreach" dell'Opera e con l'English National Opera Studio allo sviluppo di nuove opere, in particolare *The Silver Tassie* di Mark-Anthony Turnage che è stata uscita in prima mondiale nel febbraio 2000. L'Orchestra appare in numerose registrazioni per Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation tra cui *Maria Stuarda*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Rigoletto*

(produzione di Jonathan Miller), *La traviata* e *Werther*.

Il **Coro di English National Opera** è una delle migliori risorse dell'Opera. In innumerevoli produzioni della English National Opera ha entusiasmato le platee con il potere del canto e l'intensità della recitazione. Si tratta di sessantotto coristi e l'ampia gamma di capacità ed esperienza che portano nelle esibizioni costituiscono il tratto distintivo di ogni produzione in cui appaiono. Particolari trionfi per il Coro sono stati *Guerra e pace* di Prokofiev, *Lady Macbeth dei macelli* di Shostakovich, *Billy Budd* e *Peter Grimes* di Britten, *Boris Godunov* di Mussorgsky, la *Carmen* di Bizet e l'*Otello* di Verdi. Le registrazioni Chandos/Peter Moores Foundation sono il "Ciclo del *Ring*" diretti da Sir Reginald Goodall, *Ernani*, *Maria Stuarda*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Rigoletto* (produzione di Jonathan Miller) e *La traviata*.

Mark Elder, che è stato insignito della Croce di Commendatore (CBE) nel 1989, ha ricoperto importanti cariche nel Regno Unito ed in altri paesi: fra queste, la carica di Direttore Musicale dell'English National Opera (1979–93) e della Rochester

Philharmonic Orchestra negli Stati Uniti (1989–94) e di Direttore Principale Ospite della City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (1992–95), carica che ha tenuto inoltre presso la BBC Symphony Orchestra e London Mozart Players. Nel settembre 2000 diventerà Direttore Musicale della Hallé Orchestra.

Mark Elder lavora regolarmente con orchestre d'alto rango in tutta l'Europa e nel Nord America: fra queste, la Chicago Symphony Orchestra, la Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, la Los Angeles Philharmonic, l'Orchestre de Paris e l'Orchestra della Radio Tedesca (Nord Deutscher Rundfunk).

Nel Regno Unito Mark Elder è strettamente legato sia alla London Philharmonic Orchestra sia all'Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment; appare inoltre ogni anno nella stagione dei Promenade Concerts della BBC.

Mark Elder dirige regolarmente in distinti teatri lirici di rango internazionale quali la Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, The Metropolitan Opera, Opéra national de Paris-Bastille, la Lyric Opera di Chicago, Glyndebourne Festival Opera e Bayerische Staatsoper. Altri ingaggi l'hanno portato al festival di Bayreuth e ad Amsterdam, Ginevra, Berlino e Sydney.

Con la compagnia dell'English National Opera ha compiuto acclamate tournées negli Stati Uniti (che hanno incluso rappresentazioni al Metropolitan Opera) ed in Russia (che hanno compreso rappresentazioni

alla Teatro Bolshoi di Mosca e al Teatro Mariinsky di Pietroburgo). Più recentemente i suoi impegni operistici hanno compreso rappresentazioni del *Mefistofele* di Boito e dell'*Otello* per la Metropolitan Opera.



Rosalind Plowright as Desdemona and Charles Craig as Otello



Neil Howlett as Iago

Translator's note: Into this version of the English translation I have incorporated the small verbal changes that were made during the ENO performance here recorded. Some of them I welcome as improvements, and demur only at the rendering of the 'burning sands' (*arse arene*) of Othello's homeland as 'arenas'. Othello's name retains its Italian from at the conductor's request; Verdi's music prescribes the stressing of Desdemona's name on the second syllable.

Andrew Porter

COMPACT DISC ONE

Act I

The castle exterior. A tavern with pergola. Down-stage bastions and the sea. It is a stormy night, with thunder and lightning.

Scene 1

Iago, Roderigo, Cassio, Montano, and later, Otello, Cypriots and Venetian soldiers

Chorus (*tenors*)

^[1] See, the sail there!

Chorus (*basses*)

See, the sail there!

First Group

See the banner!

Second Group

See the banner!

Montano

It's the Lion of St Mark!

Cassio

Now the lightning reveals her.

(*Trumpets sound on stage.*)

Chorus (*tenors*)

Hear the trumpet!

Chorus (*basses*) (*joining the others*)

Hear the trumpet!

(*A cannon shot is heard.*)

Chorus (*tenors and basses*)

And the gun gives reply!

Cassio

It's the ship of the General.

Montano

Plunging wildly... upward heaving.

Cassio

Through the waves she is cleaving.

Chorus

She is lost in the storm and the night
but the lightning reveals her to sight.

All

Lightning!

Stormclouds! Whirlwinds!

Fury of the raging thunderbolt!

Waves are heaving!

Winds are howling!

Both the sea and mountains quake.

(*Townswomen enter up-stage.*)

Through the air some gloomy spectre seems to
rush and threaten us, as if God would shake the
heavens, shake them like a veil.

All is darkness!

All's aflame now!

Boiling pitch enshrouds the sea and sky,
and blazes, then it dies and all is darkness.

Both sea and land are shaken, the wind is
howling through the waves and lashing them.

There's a sound of demon clarions pealing in the
sky.

(*with gestures of fright and supplication, facing
towards the bastion*)

God, whose anger roused this tempest!

God, whose smile can calm its fury!

Save, oh save that gallant vessel bearing the hero
who can save us all.

God, the wind and waves obey you!

God, you rule both sea and sky!

Grant that sheltered in our harbour,
she may at anchor safely lie!

Iago

The mainsail's split in two!

Roderigo

Toward the cliff
the vessel is hurtling!

Chorus

O save her! O save her!

Iago (*to Roderigo*)

Let angry breakers smash the ship and drown her
general!

Chorus

She's safe now! She's safe now!

Off-stage Voices

Prepare to man the row-boats!

Hands to the hal yards!

Haul there!

Chorus (*tenors*)

Man the long boats!

Chorus (*basses*) (*descending the bastion stairway*)

To the harbour!

Off-stage Voices

Man the quay! We are landing!

Other Off-stage Voices

Evviva! Evviva!

Otello (*climbing to the bastion by the stairs from
the beach followed by sailors and soldiers*)

^[2] Ah rejoice now!

The glory of the Moslems has drowned at sea,
we by God's aid are victorious!

What our arms spared, the sea and storm have
vanquished.

All

Evviva! God save you!

Victorious! Victorious!

(Otello enters the fortress, followed by Cassio, Montano and soldiers.)

Chorus

Victorious! Destruction!
All shattered and broken, they lie in the sea
below, deep under the wave.
To sing them a requiem the ocean will
thunder, and lashed by the hurricane they lie
in the sea far below.

Chorus

A calm succeeds the storm now.

Iago *(aside to Roderigo)*

[3] Roderigo, speak up, what are you thinking?

Roderigo

I shall drown myself...

(Much activity takes place up-stage as the seamen climb the stairway from the beach and enter the castle carrying arms and baggage, while townspeople emerge from behind the fortress carrying branches to make a fire by the bastion. Soldiers with torches illuminate the way for the townspeople.)

Iago

Fool... no one should drown himself for the love of a woman.

Roderigo

What should I do?

(At one side some bystanders stack a pile of wood

while the rest of the crowd gathers round, inquisitive and noisy.)

Iago

Take heart, be patient, believe me, time is on your side;
for the lovely Desdemona, who fills your secret dreams with tender longing, will be tired very soon of black embraces and brutal kisses from that thick-lipped savage.
Good Roderigo,
I love you most sincerely, you must believe me; I can see your suffering and I know how to help. Those fragile vows

that a woman swore should prove an easy knot for me to untie with Hell to help me; you shall enjoy that woman as your own. Now listen; though it seems that I love him, I hate Otello...
(Enter Cassio. He joins a group of soldiers. Iago, aside to Roderigo)

And the reason for my hatred, there it is, look at him.

(pointing at Cassio)

That debonair and dapper captain usurps the rank that's mine, in many a well-fought glorious encounter richly I earned it.

(The sailors continue to mill about up-stage.)

Such was the will of Otello;
and I continue to serve his noble Moorish Lordship as ensign!

(Ever-thickening columns of smoke rise from the fire.)

But just as surely as your name's Roderigo, I can

assure you that if I were Otello, I'd fear to have around me a man like Iago.
Now listen closely...

(Iago leads Roderigo downstairs. The fire blazes up. The soldiers crowd around the tables of the tavern.)

Chorus

(During the song around the warming fire, the inn-keeper and his severs hang up around the pergola coloured Venetian lanterns which gaily illuminate the scene. The soldiers gather around the tables, some sitting, others standing, chatting and drinking.)

[4] Flame of rejoicing! – merrily burning, chasing the shadows, turning the night to glorious day. Shining and sparkling, crackling and blazing, filling the heart with fiery joy. Drawn by the firelight, fair shapes assemble, moving around us, changing their form, now like fair maidens in graceful chorus, and then like butterflies with wings aflame. The palmwood sparkles, the cedar gives answer, like faithful lovers singing of love; on golden flicker, in cheerful chorus, and the gentle breezes waft from above. Flame of rejoicing, rapidly blazing, rapidly dying fire is of love! Gleaming and glowing, flickering and fading, one final sparkle leaps up and dies.

(Gradually the fire dies down. The storm subsides. Iago, Roderigo, Cassio and several other soldiers stand or sit around a table drinking.)

Iago

[5] Roderigo, drink up!
Raise your glass,
my gallant captain.

Cassio

I'll drink no more.

Iago *(moving the wine jug towards Cassio's glass)*
Your glass should not be empty.

Cassio *(withdrawing his glass)*

No.

Iago

Captain! We must celebrate the triumph!
It's a night of rejoicing, therefore...

Cassio

Leave me. Already I'm dizzy after one single glassful.

Iago

Well, that means you need another.
To the marriage of Otello and Desdemona!

All

Evviva!

Cassio *(lifting the cup to his lips and sipping the wine)*
She makes lovely all this island.

Iago *(sotto voce to Roderigo)*
(You hear him.)

Cassio

To beauty such as hers, every heart must surrender.

Roderigo

And moreover she's modest.

Cassio

You, Iago sing a song in her praises!

Iago (*to Roderigo*)

(You hear him.)

(*in a loud voice to Cassio*)

I'm nothing if not critical.

Cassio

And far beyond all praise is her beauty.

Iago (*in the same way, aside to Roderigo*)

(Be careful of that Cassio.)

Roderigo

Why careful?

Iago (*becoming more and more insistent*)

You have heard his ardent lyrical words,
passionate youth will spur him on to adventure;
he's a smooth and clever charmer, and he's your
rival. Watch him...

Roderigo

And then?

Iago

If he's drunk he is ruined! Make him drink.

(*to the servers*)

Hey, you fellows, some wine here!

(*Iago fills the three glasses; one for himself, one for Roderigo and one for Cassio. The servers go from table to table with their wine-jugs. Iago addresses*

Cassio, with glass in hand: the crowd approaches, and looks at him with curiosity.)

Brindisi

[6] Good comrades, brave and true,
drink up, drink deeply!

Life soon will pass away, drink while you can.

Cassio (*to Iago, with glass in hand*)

Come, let me fill my glass with golden nectar
that drives gloomy clouds away from heart of
man.

Iago (*to all*)

And sing a chorus to the fruit of the vine, and
the joy that comes from drinking the wine!

Chorus

Let's sing a chorus to the fruit of the vine, and
the joy that comes from drinking the wine!

Iago (*softly to Roderigo, indicating Cassio*)

(One more glass and he'll be drunk.)

Roderigo (*to Iago*)

(One more glass and he'll be drunk.)

Iago (*in a loud voice*)

The world goes whirling round when I am
drinking!

Cassio (*still drinking*)

Tuned like a mandolin, with music I sway;
when I hear that joyful sound I sway and sing!

Iago (*as above*)

And sing a chorus to the fruit of the vine, and
the joy that comes from drinking the wine!

All

Let's sing a chorus to the fruit of the vine, and
the joy that comes from drinking the wine!

Iago (*to Roderigo*)

(One more glass and he'll be drunk.)

Roderigo (*to Iago*)

(One more glass and he'll be drunk.)

Iago (*in a loud voice*)

He who despises good wine is a coward,
his heart conceals deadly secrets...

One more glass...

Drinking the wine!

Cassio (*lifting his glass, with extreme excitement*)

My soul's an open book and all may read it!

(*He drinks.*)

I've nothing at all to hide...

(*staggering*)

nothing at all to hide... so be...

All (*laughing*)

Ha! Ha!

Cassio

The canakin clinking... bubbles are winking at
me...

(*He tries to repeat the first theme, but cannot remember the words.*)

Iago (*aside to Roderigo, while the others laugh at Cassio*)

Now that he's drunk, we'll ruin him.

Approach him and provoke him to quarrel;
he'll lose his temper, he'll try to fight and it will
cause a riot!

This is the way to rouse our good Othello and
end his bliss on his first night of love!

Roderigo (*resolutely*)

(For that reason I'll do it.)

Chorus

Ha! Ha! Drinking the wine!

Montano (*entering and addressing Cassio*)

[7] Captain Cassio,
the guard awaits your orders on the ramparts.

Cassio (*staggering*)

Let's go then!

Montano

What's this now?

Iago (*to Montano*)

(Every night in the same way Cassio prepares for
duty.)

Montano

(Othello should know it.)

Cassio (*as above*)

Let's go to guard the ramparts...

Roderigo, then All

Ha! Ha!

Cassio

Who's laughing?

Roderigo (*provoking him*)

Look at the drunkard...

Cassio (*hurling himself at Roderigo*)

Watch what you are saying! You villain!

Roderigo (*defending himself*)

A knave and a drunkard!

Cassio

You scoundrel!

For that I will kill you!

Montano (*separating them by force and turning to Cassio*)

Control your behaviour, good sir, I command you.

Cassio (*to Montano*)

I'll beat all your brains out if you try to stop me.

Montano

The words of a drunkard...

Cassio

A drunkard?

(*Cassio draws his sword. Montano also arms himself. A violent fight ensues. The crowd retreats.*)

Iago (*aside to Roderigo, rapidly*)

(Roderigo, as fast as you can through the harbour go shouting: rebellion! rebellion!

Go! Cry it all over the town; get the watchman to sound the alarm.)

(*Roderigo runs out. Iago calls to the combatants, loudly.*)

My comrades! Have done with this barbarous duel!

Women from the Chorus (*fleeing*)

Away!

Iago

What!

Already Montano is bleeding.

A murderous quarrel!

Chorus (Other Women)

Away!

Iago, then All

Stop them!

Women (*fleeing*)

They'll kill themselves!

Men (*to the duellists*)

Stop them!

Iago (*to the onlookers*)

Too late to restrain their impetuous fury!

Go sound the alarm!

They're seized by the devil!

Voices (*on-stage and off*)

The alarm bell!

(*Alarm bells are heard.*)

All

A rescue!

Scene 2

Otello, Iago, Cassio, Montano, townspeople, soldiers, and later, Desdemona

Otello (*followed by people carrying torches*)

8 Your swords cast before me!

(*The duellists drop their swords. Montano leans on a soldier. The clouds clear away gradually.*)

What's this! What happened?

Am I among barbarians?

Or have you all been seized by Turkish fury that you fight one another?...

My honest Iago, now by your love for me, I charge you, tell me.

Iago

Who knows?... One moment we were all good companions, friendly, and merry... on a sudden, just as if some star bringing evil passed overhead and bewitched their senses, they drew their weapons and fell on one another... And I would rather have lost a leg than be a witness.

Otello

Cassio, what has made you forgetful of duty...?

Cassio

Pardon... Forgive...

I know not how...

Otello

Montano...

Montano (*supported by a soldier*)

I am wounded...

Otello

You're wounded, by heaven, my blood begins to boil!

My guardian angel flies in dismay and leaves me filled with anger!

(*Enter Desdemona. Otello rushes towards her.*)

Ah! And my lovely Desdemona is roused from her dreams, disturbed by all this madness.

Cassio, you're my captain no longer.

(*Cassio drops his sword which Iago recovers.*)

Iago (*handing Cassio's sword to an officer*)

(And so I triumph!)

Otello

Iago, go lead the men of Cassio's squadron, patrol the town until the streets are quiet. (*Exit Iago.*)

Take good care of Montano.

(*Montano is helped inside the castle.*)

Let all return to their own abodes.

(*to all, imperiously*)

I myself shall remain here until the place is deserted around me.

(*Gradually the stage empties. Otello makes a sign to his torch-bearers to return to the castle.*)

Scene 3

Otello and Desdemona

Otello

9 Now in the silent darkness the strife is heard no more.

Now my heart that was raging is lulled in sweetest calm as I embrace you. Thunder and war may crack all the world asunder when after boundless anger comes such a boundless love!

Desdemona

O my warrior so proud!
So many torments and such sad tender sighing,
so many hopes have led our true loving hearts to these embraces!
Oh! It was sweet
our murmuring together;
Do you remember?

[10] Once when you told me of your life in exile, of your adventures and your years of woe, and I was seized with rapture as I heard you, I shared those sorrows, my love began to glow.

Otello

I told you of the thrill of war, of battles when we determined to conquer or die, bold sorties, and climbing battlements, and trying to scale the ramparts while arrows whistled by.

Desdemona

Then you would lead me far into the desert, burning arenas that first you called your home, when you described that shameful fate you suffered, sold into slavery, chained by a cruel hand.

Otello

But when you sighed so tenderly, that

suffering became my glory.
My sorrows then were light; for on my sombre history you poured a starry glory, and made my darkness bright.

Desdemona

And I saw on gleaming your dusky forehead all of the splendour that shines in your soul.

Otello

Ah, how you loved me
for those woes I'd suffered, and how I loved you
for your grief and care.

Desdemona

Ah, then I loved you
for those woes you'd suffered,
and how you loved me
or my grief and care.

Otello

Death, you may claim me! Let me die in the ecstasy of this enchantment, this moment of rapture!
(The night sky is by now completely clear. A few stars are visible, on the rim of the horizon the sky-blue reflection of the rising moon)
So sublime is my happiness I'm fearful that I shall never more be granted... Be granted such a moment in the dark hidden years that lie before me.

Desdemona

Let Heaven dispel your sorrows, our loving hearts will never be divided.

Otello

I pray that Heaven hears you, 'Amen' should answer from those spheres above me.

Desdemona

'Amen' they answer.

Otello *(leaning on the rampart)*

Ah! This joy that invades me
moves me so deeply that, breathless, I tremble.
I kiss you...

Desdemona

Otello!...

Otello

I kiss you...
once more I kiss you.
(standing up and staring at the starry heavens)
Now the stars of the Plough have met the ocean.

Desdemona

Ah! It is late.

Otello

Come... Venus invites us!

Desdemona

Otello!

(They make their way, arms around each other, towards the castle.)

Curtain.

Act II

Introduction. A ground-floor room in the castle. Through a window a large garden is seen. A balcony

Scene I

Iago on this side of the balcony. Cassio on the garden side

Iago

[11] Don't give up hope, but trust in me, and soon we shall see you return to win the flighty favours of Monna Bianca, once more a gallant captain, wearing your golden-hilted sword beside you.

Cassio

Do not deceive me...

Iago

Attend to what I tell you.
Surely you know that Desdemona commands our noble commander, she's the sun he lives by. All you must do is beg that generous lady to plead for Cassio, then you will soon be pardoned.

Cassio

But how can I approach her?

Iago

It is her wont to walk every afternoon under that arbour with my good wife Emilia.
So there await her.
Now I've shown you the way to your salvation; take it.

(Cassio moves away.)

Scene 2

*Iago alone**Iago (gazing after Cassio)*

[12] Take it;
take the path to your ruin.
Your evil genius drives you, your evil genius
Iago. And I am driven onward by that relentless
cruel God I believe in.
*(moving away from the balcony, no longer
looking at Cassio, who disappears through the
trees)*

[13] Yes, I believe in a God
who has created me like himself, cruel and vile
he made me.
Born from some spawn of nature or from an
atom, born into vileness.
So I am evil
because I'm human.
Primeval slime has left its vileness in me.
Yes! This is my belief!
Yes, for I do believe, just as the credulous widow
in church believes in God, that all the evil that
I do is destined, and Fate alone directs me.
Man says he's honest, he is a clowning actor in
his face and his heart; for all he does is
falsehood; charity, kissing, kindness, and his
striving's in vain.
Yes, I believe man is the fool of fortune; the
cradle holds an infant who's born to feed the
worm.
Then, after life's deluded course, comes Death.

And then? And then there's nothing.
And Heaven's a foolish tale.

*(Desdemona is seen walking in the garden with
Emilia. Iago rushes to the balcony, beyond which
Cassio waits.)*

Iago (to Cassio)

[14] There she is... Cassio...
your chance...
This is the moment.
So hurry... there's Desdemona.
*(Cassio approaches Desdemona, greets her and
walks beside her.)*
She sees him, and he greets her and he
approaches.
And now I need Otello!
O Satan, come to help me, Satan, come to help
me!
*(He remains on the balcony, looking out, but half-
hidden. Cassio and Desdemona again come into
view strolling in the garden.)*
They are talking together...
and she inclines her head, and sweetly smiles
upon him.
What pretty glances; one alone would serve me,
one smile would break Otello's heart for ever.
To work...
(He is about to leave when he stops suddenly.)
But now I see that Fate is with me.
Here he is... I'm ready. I've caught him.

*(He remains on the left side of the balcony, gazing
fixedly at Cassio and Desdemona in the garden.)*

Scene 3

*Iago and Otello**Iago (pretending not to have seen Otello
approaching, and seeming to talk to himself)*

[15] How distressing...

Otello

What is it?

Iago

Nothing... you here?
Just an idle comment that had no meaning...

Otello

That man who is departing from Desdemona,
is it Cassio?

(Both move away from the balcony.)

Iago

Cassio? No... why should Cassio sneak away
when he sees you?

Otello

Yet I am sure it's Cassio.

Iago

My good master.

Otello

What is it?

Iago

Cassio, in those first days when you were in love,
was he not a friend of Desdemona?

Otello

Yes.

But why ask such a question?

Iago

I ask it out of vague apprehension, not out of
malice.

Otello

Say what you're thinking, Iago.

Iago

And did you trust this Cassio?

Otello

Often he bore a token of love to my
Desdemona.

Iago

He did so?

Otello

Yes, he did so.

(calmly)

Is he not honest?

Iago (imitating Otello)

Not honest?

Otello

Come tell me what you're hiding.

Iago

But what should I be hiding?

Otello

'But what should I be hiding?'

By God! Are you the echo of all I say? I know in that mind of yours you're hiding dark and atrocious secrets.

Yes; for I heard those muttered words you spoke: 'How distressing'.

Tell me what so distressed you?

When I said Cassio you wrinkled up your brow and denied it.

Come on, speak if you love me.

Iago

You know well that I love you.

Otello

Then enough of concealment; tell me what you are thinking.

You can speak to me freely.

Do not be tempted to spare me, tell me the worst that can happen.

Iago

Even though you should kill me, hold my life in your fingers, I'd be silent.

Otello

Ah!

Iago (*moving close to Otello, sotto voce*)

[16] Beware, O my lord, beware of jealousy.

It is a spiteful monster, sightless, feeding on poison whose taste is fatal, tearing a wound in your heart that never heals.

Otello

O God in Heaven! No! She first must give me cause for suspicion.

Before I doubt her I'll question her; if I doubt her I'll prove it; and if I prove it (Otello turns thoughts into action), then jealousy and love will be destroyed together.

Iago (*growing bolder*)

Those ardent words unseal my lips and now I'll speak freely.

I do not talk of proof yet; but, O my noble Otello, just observe her, for often a free and trusting nature can overlook the signs that tell of falsehood; so observe her.

And mark the sense of every word she says to you; one sentence maybe will show she's guiltless, or confirm your suspicion.

There she is; so observe her...

(Desdemona reappears in the garden, seen through the large opening down-stage. She is surrounded by the island women, children and Cypriot and Albanian sailors, who come forward and present her with flowers and other gifts. Some accompany their singing on the guzla, others on small harps.)

Chorus (*in the garden*)

[17] At your glances, flame in our hearts leaps up to meet you, round your footsteps carpets of flowers spring up to greet you.

Here mid rose and lily, as at sacred altars, fathers, children, maidens join to sing your praise.

At your glances, etc.

Children (*scattering lily petals on the ground*)

We bring you lilies on the slender stem... The flowers that angels love to bear on high, to lay on the hem of the glorious mantle of our Madonna who dwells on high.

Women and Sailors

As our song goes winging rising up on high, mandoline is strumming and guitars reply.

Sailors (*offering Desdemona coral and pearl necklaces*)

For you these coral gems, from depths of ocean, jewels found beneath the waves, pearls of softest shine.

We'd adorn Desdemona with our richest treasures, like some fair statue in a holy shrine.

Children and Women

As the song is winging lightly, winging lightly, mandoline is strumming, and gay guitars reply.

Women (*strewing fronds and flowers*)

For you we gathered flowers all that the island bears, clouds of fragrance, in fragrant showers.

The spring surrounds you, O bride of springtime, with radiant golden shine, reflecting the sun's bright ray.

Children and Sailors

As the song is winging lightly, winging lightly, mandoline is strumming, and gay guitars reply.

All

At your glances, flame in our hearts leaps up to meet you, round your footsteps, carpets of flowers spring up to greet you.

Here mid rose and lily, as at sacred altars, fathers, children, maidens join to sing your praise.

Desdemona

Heaven is smiling, breezes dance and flowers are sweet.

Joy and hope conspire, singing their song of love.

Chorus

Heaven will bless you!

Heaven will bless your love.

(During the chorus Otello looks on with Iago.)

Otello (*tenderly*)

...Ah, how this song o'erwhelms me.

If she is guilty, then Heaven itself deceives me!

Iago

(So love and beauty are joined in sweet concord!

But soon I shall destroy their tender concord.)

Scene 4

(When the chorus have finished, Desdemona kisses several children on the brow, and some of the women kiss the hem of her dress. She hands a purse to the sailors. The chorus move away. Desdemona, with Emilia in attendance, enters the room and goes towards Otello.)

Desdemona (*to Othello*)

¹⁸ I come from someone
who has felt your anger and for him I am
pleading.

Othello

Who can that be?

Desdemona

Cassio.

Othello

Was it he I saw beside you underneath that
arbour?

Desdemona

Yes, Cassio. And by his grief I'm moved so
deeply; he is repentant, he deserves forgiveness.
I am pleading for him; for him I implore you.
So please forgive him.

Othello

Not now.

Desdemona

O my lord, can you refuse me?
Please forgive him.

Othello

Not now.

Desdemona

I can hear you are troubled.
Your voice is angry.
What pain has come to hurt you?

Othello

Here on my forehead...

Desdemona (*unfolding her handkerchief as if
about to wipe Othello's forehead*)

All that ugly pain will quickly pass at the
soothing touch of this linen when I bind your
forehead.

Othello (*throwing the handkerchief to the
ground*)

I've no need of your help.

Desdemona

Ah, you are angry my lord!

Othello (*harshly*)

Oh leave me! Just leave me!

(*Emilia picks up the handkerchief.*)

Desdemona

If unknowing I've done wrong, husband,
forgive me.

¹⁹ Grant me,

oh grant me sweet words of pardon, say you
forgive me.

I am your gentle handmaid longing to help and
serve you; ah, but I hear you sighing.

Why are your eyes cast down?

Look in my eyes and read there, read all my
tender love.

For in my heart is comfort, Oh let me ease your
pain.

Othello (*aside*)

(Maybe I lack the art of amusing conversation,
maybe she finds me old and seeks a younger
companion, maybe because my blackness alarms
her tender soul, oh, she is ruined and I am
scorned; broken my heart, and ground to dust
my longing, lost my dream of love.)

Iago (*sotto voce to Emilia*)

Give me that handkerchief that you are holding.

Emilia (*sotto voce to Iago*)

Why do you want it?
What are you planning?

Iago

Do not oppose me when I command you.

Emilia

Yes I can see that you plan some mischief.

Iago

Your wild suspicions!

Emilia

But, I shall be her faithful guardian.

Iago

Give it to me!

(*He grasps Emilia's arm violently.*)

Obey or else you will feel my anger!

Emilia

I am your wife, I'm not your slave-girl.

Iago

You are the servant and slave of Iago.

Emilia

And in my heart I fear some misfortune.

Iago

Do you not fear me!

Emilia

You cruel man!

Iago

Obey...

Emilia

Why should I?

Iago

Obey! Obey!

(*Iago snatches the handkerchief from Emilia*)

(Now I have got what I needed and Iago knows
how to use it.

Yes I can use it!)

Emilia

(I could not stop him and he has snatched it.
God in your mercy guard her from danger.)

Othello

Now leave me! I must be alone.

Iago (*sotto voce to Emilia who is about to
leave*)

(And you must be quiet. Do you hear me?)

(*Exeunt Desdemona and Emilia. Iago also seems
about to leave, but reaching the door down-stage,
he stops.*)

Scene 5

Otello, Iago down-stage

Otello (*in despair*)

^[20] Desdemona guilty!

Iago (*down-stage, looking covertly at the handkerchief, then putting it carefully back inside his jerkin*)

(This handkerchief can be my certain proof that she was false to her lord.

Now I must leave it where Cassio's sure to find it.)

Otello

Can I believe it?

Iago (*to himself, staring at Otello*)
(I see my poison working.)

Otello

Faithless to me! To me!!!

Iago (*darkly*)

(Roar and suffer!)

Otello

Betrayal!!!!... Betrayal!!!!...

Iago (*good-humouredly, having moved to Otello's side*)

Do not give it a thought!

Otello (*jumping to his feet*)

You? Be careful! Leave me!
To the cross you have bound me!...

Alas... More dreadful than a crime committed is the pain of suspicion.

Those secret hours when she fed her passion (when I was cheated!) how could I suspect them?

I had no reason. I was happy, oblivious...

I could not guess the truth; I felt no treason in that fair lovely form, as I embraced her; could not taste in her kisses the burning kisses of

Cassio! But now!...

^[21] Now and forever farewell,

all that I lived for, farewell, sublime enchantment of the mind!

Farewell, glittering arms, farewell, my victories, gallant adventure on my cantering steed!

Farewell, the banner that I bore in triumph!

When the peal of trumpet called me to arms!

The call of clarion in battle, farewell now!...

For Otello's glory is at an end.

Iago

Calm now, my lord.

Otello

O you demon! Go find me a visible token that Desdemona is guilty...

No escape! No escape!

Nothing can help you!

Find me a sure, visible, certain token!

Or I shall destroy you, a furious lightning flash will fall upon your head, and my terrible anger will strike you!

(*grasping Iago by the throat and dragging him to the ground*)

Iago (*picking himself up*)

The grace of Heaven protect me now!

May Heaven protect you also.

I'm no longer your ensign.

Now let me call upon the world to witness how being true is rewarded.

(*as if about to leave*)

Otello

No... remain here.

For perhaps you are honest.

Iago (*at the doorway as if leaving*)

Better for me if I'd simply told a lie.

Otello

^[22] By all creation!

Can I believe in Desdemona?

I do so and yet I doubt her; you may be honest and maybe you're a liar... A proof is needed!

Ah, I must be certain!

Iago (*coming back to Otello*)

My lord, restrain your passion.

What proof could you accept as certain?

Perhaps you would see them kissing?

Otello

Ah! That would be a torment!

Iago

But it wouldn't be easy; you cannot hope for a certain proof, for how can deeds of darkness ever be seen by day?... And yet there's something, something that may convince you, something

that in itself may seem but a trifle – not a proof but just a pointer towards the truth you seek. So hear it.

(*approaching close to Otello, sotto voce*)

^[23] Darkness had fallen,

Cassio was sleeping, I lay beside him.

With interrupted accents he uttered all he was thinking.

Softly he whispered, gently he murmured,

telling his secrets as he lay dreaming;

clearly I heard him, murmuring gently:

'Desdemona beloved!

Oh let our love be secret.

We must be careful!

Ecstasy of love quite overwhelms me.'

Then in his dreaming he moved toward me;

tried to embrace me with tender passion as if he loved me, and then he whispered:

'I curse the evil destiny

that gave you to the Moor.'

And then his dream passed on.

He fell into slumber, said no more.

Otello

Now I'm sure she's guilty!

Iago

It was a dream I told you.

Otello

A dream can tell us what is true.

Iago

A dream sometimes confirms what we suspect for other reasons.

Otello

What's that?

Iago

Do you remember in Desdemona's hand a lovely handkerchief adorned with flowers and of a silken texture?

Otello

That is the handkerchief I gave her, as my first gift of love.

Iago

I saw the handkerchief yesterday (yes, I am sure),
I saw it held by Cassio.

Otello

Ah! Would that God had given him twenty thousand lives!
Ah! For then twenty thousand times I'd kill him!
Iago, my heart is frozen.
And I renounce every form of pity.
All of my foolish love I change to hatred.
Look at me, beware me.
Crushed by the coils of the angry monster of jealousy!
Ah! Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance!
(*He kneels.*)

- [24] See me swear, you heavens above me!
By the jagged lightning flash!
Hear me call, you angry sea below, fatal and dark!
I devote my soul to vengeance, soon the flame of hate will flash from my hand, as I raise it!

(*He raises his hand to heaven. Otello is about to rise; Iago prevents him and kneels himself.*)

Iago

Do not rise, my lord!
Hear me call the sun
to witness, call that globe which lights my way,
call the earth and all creation; hear my solemn vow!
To Otello I am faithful, heart and hands are his alone.
If he calls for deeds of vengeance gladly I obey!

Iago and Otello (*together, raising their hands to heaven, as if swearing a vow*)

See me swear, you heavens above me!
By the jagged lightning flash!
Hear me call, you angry sea below, fatal and dark!
I devote my soul to vengeance, soon the flame of hatred will fire this hand, this hand I raise now!
God, hear me on high!

Curtain.

COMPACT DISC TWO

Act III

The great hall of the castle. The stage is divided by a row of pillars around a large peristyle on the right. The characters can pass freely into the smaller room, adjoining the peristyle, which has a balcony at one end, up-stage.

Scene 1

Otello, Iago, the Herald

The Herald (*from the peristyle, to Otello who is in the room with Iago*)

- [1] I bring word that the watchman at the harbour has sighted the Venetian vessel that is bringing the ambassadors to Cyprus.

Otello (*to the Herald, motioning him to leave*)
Make them welcome.

(*Exit the Herald.*)
(*to Iago*)
Continue.

Iago

I've sent for Cassio, and with my clever questions I'll lead him on to talk, while you in hiding (*indicating the balcony*) can hear his every word, observe his answers, his actions, his gestures.
But control your anger or the truth will escape you.
Here is Desdemona.
You must be careful...
I'll leave you.

(*He moves away as if to leave, then stops and approaches Otello again.*)
The handkerchief...

Otello

Go! Why remind me?
I would gladly forget.
(*Exit Iago.*)

Scene 2

Otello, Desdemona from the door on the left

Desdemona (*still by the doorway*)

- [2] God give you joy, Otello,
dear lord and ruler of my heart.

Otello (*going towards Desdemona and taking her hand*)

Thank you, my lady, let me hold your snow-white hand in mine.
Warm is the dew that glows here upon this ivory hand.

Desdemona

Ah, it has learned no sorrow, has felt no age or care.

Otello

And yet within this gentle hand there lurks a tiny devil.
A crafty imp is hiding there, making this hand too generous.
To chastise him, fold your hands in repentance and holy fervour...

Desdemona

And yet this hand consented to give my heart to Otello.
But I have come to speak to you of Cassio.

Otello

Again I feel that burning pain in my forehead; will you help me to soothe it?

Desdemona (*offering him a handkerchief*)

Take this.

Otello

No; that handkerchief I gave you when first we met.

Desdemona

It's not with me.

Otello

Desdemona, beware if you've lost it!

Beware then!

For it was woven by an enchantress whose powers were mighty; and while she wove it, she cast a spell there, of dark enchantment.

Careful! To lose it or give it away would bring disaster!

Desdemona

Are you in earnest?

Otello

I am in earnest.

Desdemona

You make me frightened!

Otello

What! Maybe you have lost it?

Desdemona

No...

Otello

Then fetch it.

Desdemona

I'll do so...

I'll do so later...

Otello

No, now!

Desdemona

[3] You are trying to tease me, thus you reject my pleading for Cassio; O sly Otello, I see your plan.

Otello

By Heaven!

I feel my blood is boiling!

Go find that handkerchief...

Desdemona

To Cassio you've always been devoted.

Otello

Now find that handkerchief!

Desdemona

Let Cassio, Cassio be pardoned...

Otello

Go, find that handkerchief!

Desdemona

O God! I hear you threaten, your voice is dark with fury!

Otello

Lift up your head!

(*Seizing her by the neck and shoulders and forcing her to look at him.*)

Desdemona

A cruel thought!

Otello

Look at my eyes!

Tell me, who are you?

Desdemona

The true loving wife of Otello.

Otello

Swear it!

Damn yourself swearing...

Desdemona

Otello must know I'm honest.

Otello

I know that you're lying.

Desdemona

Then heaven help me!

Otello

Run to your own damnation, swear you are faithful.

Desdemona (*staring at him*)

Faithful I am...

Otello

Swear it and damn yourself!!!

Desdemona

You glare at me in anger, I meet your glance and fear it, in you there speaks a fury, I hear it, and I'm bewildered.

Behold me! Observe my eyes and read what's in them;

my heart lies open before you... I pray to Heaven, for you my tears are falling, for you this crystal stream of despairing and sorrow flows. See them the first sad tears I shed; see them, and in your heart reply; Desdemona is true.

My tears are shed for you.

Otello

If your demon could see you now, he'd take you for an angel and would reject you.

Desdemona

God sees my heart and knows me faithful!

Otello

No! It's Satan who sees you.

Desdemona

For justice I implore you, O my husband!

Otello

Ah! Desdemona! Now leave me!

Yes, leave me!

Oh leave me!

Desdemona

You are weeping?!...

With a secret torment your heart is breaking!

Ah, how can I be the cause of your grief,

when I am blameless?

What is my fault then?

Otello

You ask me?...

On your brow see it written, on that white lovely brow in letters of flame it's written.

Desdemona

Alas!

Otello

What! You deny you're a treacherous harlot?

Desdemona

Ah! No! No! Let me swear it on my faith as a Christian!...

Otello

What?

Desdemona

I am not, I swear it, that dreadful word you called me.

(Changing suddenly from anger to a more frightening ironic calm, Otello takes Desdemona by the hand and leads her to the door by which she entered.)

Otello

Then let me hold once more that white hand; I ask your pardon.

I mistook you (please forgive me, I'm sorry that I wronged you) for the vile filthy harlot who's the wife of Otello.

(With these words, Otello, who has now reached the door on the left, forces Desdemona out of the room with a brusque movement. He returns, in utter despair, to the centre of the stage.)

Scene 3

Otello

Otello

- [4] God! Had it pleased you to try me with affliction, with cruel torment, shameful dishonour, change all my triumphs, my deeds of adventure into a mockery, turn them, to ashes... I should have carried with patience that cross of anguish and borne it in calm submission and been resigned to the wishes of Heaven. But, oh pain, oh grief! I have lost my fair vision by whose bewitchment I was enchanted. All now is lost, all I lived for, the radiant star that inspired me, filling my soul with joy! And tender Pity, you angel of grace inspiring mercy, cover your gentle features, assume a grim aspect of Hell!

Scene 4

Otello, then Iago

Otello

Ah! Damned for ever!

I will make her confess it and then I'll kill her!

I must know! I must know!

I'll prove it!

Iago *(beside Otello and pointing to the entrance)*

Cassio's here!

Otello

Here? Great God! I thank you!

(with a sudden shudder of horror)

But oh! What cruel torment!

Iago

Now hurry! Into hiding!

(He leads Otello quickly towards the balcony; he runs to the back of the peristyle where Cassio is standing, undecided whether to enter.)

Scene 5

Otello (hidden), Iago and Cassio

Iago

- [5] Come now; the hall's deserted. So join me, my gallant captain.

Cassio

I'm a captain no more, I have been stripped of my rank.

Iago

Take heart, for with her as your champion your victory is certain.

Cassio

I thought that maybe I should find Desdemona.

Otello *(hidden)*

(He spoke her name.)

Cassio

I want once more to see her to discover if my pardon is granted.

Iago *(gaily)*

Await her; and meanwhile I know that your tongue is eager to tell me all your new adventures: what is the news of that poor girl who loves you?

(leading Cassio close to the first column of the peristyle)

Cassio

Which one?

Iago *(almost sotto voce)*

Oh, Bianca!

Otello

(He's smiling.)

Cassio

Nonsense!

Iago

Are you a victim of her bright eyes?

Cassio

You make me laugh.

Iago

Laughing is winning.

Cassio *(laughing)*

Only too true in duels of love, laughing is winning. Ha! Ha!

Iago

Ah! Ah!

Otello *(from the balcony)*

(He is triumphant, and his laughter will kill me, God give me strength now to bear all my grief!)

Cassio

That woman's kisses, oh, how they bore me.

Iago

You make me laugh.

Cassio

Ah, love is fleeting!

Iago

A new adventure captures your heart.

Have I guessed rightly?

Cassio

Ha! Ha!

Iago

Ha! Ha!

Otello

(He is triumphant,
and his laughter will kill me;

God give me strength now to bear all my pain!)

Cassio

You have guessed it rightly.

Yes, I confess it.

Listen...

Iago (*almost sotto voce*)

Speak in a whisper. I'm listening.

Cassio (*almost sotto voce, while Iago leads him to
the part of the stage furthest away from Otello.*

Now and then words are distinguishable)

Iago, you know
that house where I'm staying...

.....
.....

(*The words are lost.*)

Otello (*cautiously, moving closer to hear what they
are saying*)

(And now he's telling the manner, the place,
the hour...)

Cassio (*continuing to speak sotto voce*)

.....

And someone left there.....

.....

(*The words are lost.*)

Otello

(I can't hear what he's saying...

Closer! I must overhear!

What have I come to!)

Cassio

.....

An embroidered handkerchief...

.....

Iago

She left it! How charming!

Otello

(I must approach them. Iago gives the signal.)

(*Gradually, Otello, moving behind the columns
with great caution, manages to draw close to the
pair.*)

Iago (*sotto voce*)

While you were absent?

(*loudly*)

Nonsense!

Cassio

Yes, truly.

(*Iago makes a sign to him to speak lower.*)

So I am eager to learn who left it...

Iago (*to himself, with a quick glance towards*

Otello)

(Otello's watching.)

(*loudly to Cassio*)

Then show me!

Cassio (*he draws Desdemona's handkerchief from
his jerkin*)

Here it is.

Iago (*taking the handkerchief*)

Ah how delightful!

(*aside*)

(Otello's listening.

He is approaching with stealthy footsteps.)

(*bending with a laugh towards Cassio and putting
his hands behind his back so that Otello can see the
handkerchief*)

Who can resist you?

Visiting angels leave both their virtue and their
veils behind.

Otello (*drawing as close as he can to the
handkerchief, behind Iago, hidden by the first
column*)

(That's it. She gave it!

Oh mortal anguish!)

Iago

(Otello's listening.)

Otello (*hidden behind the column and from time
to time looking at the handkerchief in Cassio's
hands*)

(All is ended!

Both love and grief!

And my heart has turned to stone.)

Iago (*to Cassio, pointing to the handkerchief*)

6 This is a cobweb,
men are flies,
caught in the web, the victim dies.
If you admire it, you must beware;
if you desire it, you're in a snare.

Cassio (*looking at the handkerchief which he has
meantime retrieved from Iago*)

O fair shining marvel what needle could make
you?

You sparkle so brightly with rays from above,
so whitely, so lightly, a delicate flake of snow,
of starry beams they wove you to fill men with
love.

Otello

(She betrayed me, I have proved it;
crimes of darkness shine by day.)

(*Trumpet fanfare off-stage, then a cannon shot.
Otello has returned to the balcony.*)

Iago

Careful! Careful!

That is the signal to tell that the envoys coming
from Venice have landed safely.

And listen.
(fanfares from all sides)
 All of the castle is ringing with trumpets.
 If you remain here Otello will find you, off now.

Cassio
 I'll leave you.

Iago
 Go.

(Exit Cassio quickly.)

Scene 6
Iago and Otello.

Otello *(moving closer to Iago)*

7 How shall I take her life?

Iago
 And did you see how he was laughing?

Otello
 I saw it.

(Intermittent fanfares and shouts of joy are heard.)

Iago
 You saw the handkerchief?

Otello
 I saw it plainly.

Voices *(off-stage, distant)*
 To the harbour!
 They are landing!

Otello
 And it condemns her.
 Go prepare me a draught of deadly poison.

Voices *(nearer)*
 Evviva! Evviva!
 The Lion of St Mark!

Iago
 Not poison. Your best way is to choke her.
 There in her bed, there where she betrayed you.

Otello
 Yes, I approve of your plan, that's fitting.

Iago
 With Cassio, Iago himself will deal.

Otello
 Iago, from this day forth I appoint you my captain.

Iago
 My noble
 Lord, I thank you.
(The noises grow louder. Fanfares and shouts)
 Envoys have come from Venice.
 You must meet them.
 But to avoid suspicion Desdemona should be with you to greet them.

Otello
 Yes, go to call her.
(Exit Iago by the door on the left, Otello goes to receive the envoys.)

Scene 7
Otello, Lodovico, Roderigo, the Herald, Dignitaries of the Venetian Republic, Gentlemen and Ladies, Soldiers, Trumpeters upstage, then Iago with Desdemona and Emilia, from the left.

Chorus
 8 Hail him! All hail him!
 Hail to the Lion of St Mark!

Lodovico *(holding a rolled-up parchment in his hand)*
 The Doge and all the Senate through me salute the all-victorious hero of Cyprus. And as their envoy I have brought you the decree of the Council.

Otello *(accepting the missive and kissing the seal)*
 In humble duty I kiss the symbol of their might.

Lodovico *(approaching Desdemona)*
 My lady, may kind Heaven safely guard you.

Desdemona
 May Heaven hear you.

Emilia *(aside to Desdemona)*
 (Why all your sadness?)

Desdemona *(aside to Emilia)*
 (Emilia! Some evil shadows cloud the mind of Otello and cloud my future.)

Iago *(approaching Lodovico)*
 Messere, we're glad to have you with us.
(Lodovico, Desdemona and Iago gather in a group.)

Lodovico
 Iago,
 what's the news here?
 And why is Cassio not among you?

Iago
 He's lost Otello's favour.

Desdemona
 I'm sure he'll soon return to grace.

Otello *(to Desdemona, rapidly while pretending to read)*
 Are you so certain?

Desdemona
 What say you?

Lodovico
 He's reading, he did not hear you.

Iago
 Maybe he'll soon return to grace.

Desdemona
 Iago, I hope so; all know how tenderly I feel toward our Cassio...

Otello *(still reading; feverishly sotto voce, to Desdemona)*
 Then keep your chattering tongue from its nagging...

Desdemona
 Oh forgive me, my lord...

Otello *(hurling himself at Desdemona)*
 You fiend, be silent!

Lodovico (*rushing to Otello's hand*)

No!

All

Oh horror!

Lodovico

My mind will not believe what my eyes have had to witness.

Otello (*suddenly, and imperiously, to the Herald*)

Go call Cassio!

(*Exit the Herald.*)

Iago (*moving quickly to Otello's side, speaking in a low voice*)

(Why call him?)

Otello (*to Iago in a low voice*)

(Watch her when first he enters.)

All

Unhappy lady!

Lodovico (*in a low voice, drawing nearer to Iago, who has moved a short way from Otello*)

And can that be the hero?

That be the soldier you obey as your leader?

Iago (*to Lodovico, shrugging his shoulders*)

He's what he is.

Lodovico

Come tell me what you're thinking.

Iago

Where he's concerned my tongue had best be silent.

Scene 8

Cassio, followed by the Herald, and the above

Otello (*whose eyes never leave the door*)

(There he is! He's here!)

(*moving towards Iago as Cassio is about to enter*)

(Observe his every action.)

(*loudly for all to hear*)

[9] All hear me! The Doge...

(*harshly but sotto voce to Desdemona*)

(Now pretend you're weeping.)

(*loudly for all to hear*)

has recalled me to Venice.

Roderigo

(My hopes are shattered.)

Otello (*continuing to speak loudly but in control of himself*)

And he's appointed to take my place the man who served so faithfully beside me, Cassio.

Iago (*with vehemence and surprise*)

(Infernal torment!)

Otello (*continuing as above, he displays the parchment*)

Thus the Doge has decreed and I obey him.

Cassio (*kneeling to Otello*)

And so shall I.

Otello (*quickly and covertly to Iago, pointing to Cassio*)

(See him? The news is not to his liking.)

Iago

(No.)

Otello (*loudly for everyone to hear*)

The men whom I commanded

(*speaking very rapidly and sotto voce to Desdemona*)

(Continue with your whining...)

(*loudly for all to hear, no longer looking at Cassio*)

And the fleet and the fortress I leave in charge of your new general.

Lodovico (*to Otello, pointing to Desdemona, who approaches as a suppliant*)

Otello,

Now be kind, comfort her, her heart is breaking.

Otello (*to Lodovico and Desdemona*)

We shall embark at daybreak.

(*in a fury he seizes Desdemona*)

So lie there! And weep there!

(*Desdemona falls. Emilia and Lodovico run to her aid, raising her gently. Otello, in a fearsome rage, has thrown the parchment to the ground. Iago retrieves it and secretly reads it.*)

Desdemona

[10] I lie here! Yes: I lie in the dust here... in despair...

rejected... grieving...

some evil force has changed that noble heart

I love.

Once my life was smiling

when hope and love inspired me, but now all

hope of joy has fled.

I lie here... my body broken... my soul in agony.

I cannot hide my tears, my wounded heart I try in vain to hide.

Emilia

(No angry words escape her!)

Ah, she is brave and true; checks in her breast

her cry of woe...

she seeks to conceal her grief.

Her tears are flowing, sorrow beclouds her brow.

O Lord, may this disaster, causing her bitter grief, may it not be an omen of worse to come.)

Roderigo

My hopes are plunged in darkness, and cruel fate's unkind; she will depart at daybreak and I am left behind.)

Cassio

(A sudden flash of lightning reveals a glorious hope, honour and fame await me, and all is within my grasp.

But can I trust my fortune?

Wild storm is all about me.

In sudden waves that bear me upward I may drown.)

Lodovico

(Raising his hand against her, clenching his swarthy fist!

She turns her face to heaven and seeks relief on high.

All who behold her weeping weep in their hearts to see her.

My heart is filled with sorrow, tears fill my eyes
with grief.)

(The chorus converse in groups.)

Women

O heaven!

Men

Mysterious!

Chorus

Pity and terror shake me!

Oh scene of sorrow!

Oh fearful sight!

With hand upraised, he defies God.

Women

Ah, see her, pure and tender, in tears of grief.

Men

Raising hands against her, he clenches his black
fist, trembling with dark rage.

Iago *(approaching Otello who is slumped, in utter
despair, in a chair)*

Take my advice.

Otello

What now?

Iago

My lord, do not let fury blind you.

Time is flying.

Otello

That's true.

Iago

Anger alone is useless!

Do not delay!

Act swiftly, you must act!

The crime must be avenged.

I'll deal with Cassio.

He will rejoice no longer, in Hell he will atone
for what he has done!

Otello

Who'll take his life?

Iago

I.

Otello

You?

Iago

I give my word.

Otello

So be it.

Iago

By tonight you will learn that he is dead.

*(He leaves Otello and moves towards Roderigo,
to whom he speaks ironically.)*

And so your love will sail away tomorrow and
leave you on the shore!

Roderigo

Alas!

Iago

You coward!

Coward! One hope remains.

You cannot conquer evil fortune.

So hear my plan.

Roderigo

I'm listening.

Iago

Otello will sail away at daybreak, and Cassio is
in charge. But if something should happen to

(touching his sword)

Cassio... why then Otello stays here.

Roderigo

A devilish scheme!

I see your plan.

Iago

Sword at the ready!

And when it is dark I shall follow his footsteps,

I'll choose the place, the moment, then you

must act. Take heart! Good hunting!

No sign of weakness!

Roderigo

Command me!

My fate is in your hands.

Iago *(in the centre of the stage)*

¹¹ All in this day of glory rejoice, put cares aside!

See, our star is victorious, that star can be our
guide.

(The male chorus repeat his lines.)

Women

Ah, who can see her suffering!

Tears fill my eyes with sorrow, my heart is filled
with grief.

All who behold her weep at the sight.

Otello *(rising and facing the crowd, with a
terrifying expression)*

Now leave me!

All

Ah!

Otello *(hurling himself at the crowd)*

All men must fly Otello!

(off-stage fanfare)

Iago *(to the onlookers)*

His old disease assails him,
depriving him of reason.

Otello *(in a ringing voice)*

All those who remain with me, I brand as rebel.

Lodovico *(he tries to pull Desdemona away)*

Come...

Voices *(from outside)*

Evviva!

Desdemona *(freeing herself from Lodovico and
running towards Otello)*

My husband!

Otello *(in a terrifying voice to Desdemona)*

Wife of my bosom, my curse upon you!

All
Oh God!

(Exeunt all horrified, Desdemona with the aid of Emilia and Lodovico.)

Scene 9

Otello and Iago, alone

Otello *(growing more and more agitated)*

- ^[12] But who can flee himself!
Blood! Ah! Too terrible to think of!...
'How distressing!'
(He is unable to control himself.)
I see them both embracing...
the handkerchief...
Ah!

(He faints.)

Iago

(My poison works upon him.)

Fanfare and Voices *(from outside)*

Hail Otello!

Iago *(listening to the shouts, then looking at Otello prostate and senseless on the ground)*

Hear! They're shouting his praises.

Soon it will all be over.

(after a pause)

If on that brow I place my heel, what power on earth can stop me?

Fanfare and Voices *(off-stage, growing louder)*

Long live Otello! Hail to the Lion of St Mark!

Iago *(standing, with a gesture of gloating triumph, pointing at Otello, inert on the ground)*

There lies your Lion!

Curtain.

Act IV

Desdemona's bedroom. Bed, prie-dieu, table, mirror, chairs. A hanging lamp burns before the image of the Madonna, which rests above the prie-dieu. A door on the right. It is night. A light burning on the table

Scene 1

Desdemona and Emilia

Emilia

- ^[13] Did he seem calmer?

Desdemona

Yes, I think so. He bade me go to my chamber and await him there.

Emilia. Let me ask you to lay upon my bed the bridal sheets that were spread there on my wedding night.

(Emilia does so.)

Listen. If I should chance to die before you, see that I'm shrouded in one of those bridal sheets.

Emilia

But why this talk of dying!

Desdemona *(sitting down without thinking before the mirror)*

I'm so unhappy.

My mother once had a poor little servant, as fair

as she was faithful, and her name was Barbara; she was in love and he she loved proved false; she used to sing a song; the Song of the Willow. *(to Emilia)*

Will you loosen my tresses.

This very evening, how that unhappy strain haunts my mind and will not leave me.

- ^[14] 'The poor soul sat sighing beneath a willow, beside a sad stream.

O willow! willow! willow!

Alone and crying and lost in a sad dream.

Willow! willow! willow!

Sing willow!

This willow wreath I'll twine to be my bridal garland.'

But hurry now; for soon will come Otello.

'The quiet stream ran by her where the rushes grow,

in vain it tried to cheer her, and from her eyelids bitter tears would flow;

that stream grew mournful to hear her.

Oh willow! willow! willow!

Sing willow!

This willow wreath I'll twine to be my bridal garland.

From branches high above sweet birds came flying, moved by her tender moaning.

And when they heard her piteous lamentation, the very stones were groaning.'

Please put away this necklace.

Unhappy Barbara! Her plaintive story always would end with a simple refrain:

'Oh he was destined for deeds of glory, and I to love...'

(breaking off)

But listen. Someone is crying.

Quiet. Who's knocking at the door?

Emilia

It's the wind.

Desdemona

'And I to love him and to die.

Sing willow!

Willow! willow! willow!

Farewell, Emilia.

How my eyelids are burning!

It's a sure sign of weeping.

Good night, Emilia.

Ah! Emilia, Emilia, farewell.

(Emilia turns to leave, then returns and Desdemona embraces her. Exit Emilia.)

Scene 2

Desdemona alone

Desdemona *(She goes to the prie-dieu.)*

- ^[15] Ave Maria, Mother of mercy, O loving Holy Virgin, blessed be thy name; and blessed be the fruit, O gentle mother, of thy most sacred womb, Jesu.
Pray for those who humbly kneel before thee, pray for those who sin, and for the sinless, pray for all who know oppression, and for the oppressor, he too is

wretched, and he needs thy mercy.
Pray for a maiden whose heart must bear
cruel grief, who suffers from unjust suspicion;
pray, we implore thee, pray for us ever, while
we are living, and in the hour of dying.
Pray for us all...

*(She remains kneeling, her forehead resting on the
prie-dieu as if in silent prayer. Only the first and
last words of the prayer can be heard.)*

Ave Maria...

And in the hour of dying.

Amen.

(She rises and goes to lie down.)

Scene 3

*Desdemona and Otello. Otello enters by a secret
door, places a scimitar on the table, and pauses
before the light, undecided whether to extinguish it.
He looks at Desdemona. He puts out the light. The
scene is illuminated only by a light from the prie-
dieu. Otello, driven by a sudden burst of fury,
approaches the bed; there he pauses. He gazes at
Desdemona who is sleeping. He kisses her three
times. At the third kiss Desdemona awakens.*

Desdemona

¹⁶ Who's there?...

(She raises herself.)

Otello?

Otello

Yes! Have you said your prayers tonight,

Desdemona?

Desdemona

I prayed.

Otello

If you remember some mortal sin you've
committed which still remains unconfessed,
you must ask for God's pardon.

Desdemona

But why?

Otello

And quickly!

I do not wish to kill your immortal soul.

Desdemona

You mean to kill me?

Otello

Yes.

Desdemona

Then God have mercy on me.

Otello

Amen.

Desdemona

Otello, and you have mercy too.

Otello

Think of your offences.

Desdemona

All my sin has been love.

Otello

For that I kill you.

Desdemona

Because I love you, you'll kill me?...

Otello

You love Cassio.

Desdemona

No! I swear I do not!!

Otello

Do you deny you gave my handkerchief to
Cassio?

Desdemona

I did not!

Otello

Yet in his hand I saw it.

Desdemona

I am not guilty!

Otello

Confess it!

Desdemona

Truly.

Otello

Do not tell a falsehood...

Ah! Now confess as you lie on your deathbed.

Desdemona

But not to die.

Otello

To die this instant.

Desdemona

God help me!

I don't love Cassio...

go and ask him.

He'll tell you.

Otello

He's silent for ever.

Desdemona

Heaven! Murdered?

Otello *(coldly)*

Murdered.

Desdemona

Then I'm lost!

for you wrong him!

Otello *(forcefully)*

You dare to mourn him?

Desdemona

Otello... do not murder me...

Otello

In vain you beg for mercy.

Desdemona *(in desperation)*

O God, I want to live...

Otello

So die now, you vile harlot!

Desdemona

Be kind!

Otello

Die!

Desdemona

Oh let me live tomorrow...

Otello

No.

Desdemona

An hour...

Otello

No.

Desdemona

Then a moment...

Otello

No.

Desdemona

While I say an Ave.

Otello

Too late now!

(He strangles her. A cry from Desdemona.

A knocking at the door is heard. He gazes at the inert body of Desdemona.)

¹⁷ Calm and cold as the tomb.

Emilia *(from outside, again beating on the door)*

Otello! Otello!

Otello *(stumbling)*

Who's there! Who's knocking!

Emilia *(as above)*

Oh my lord...

Come quickly, there's news that I must bring you!

Come, open!

Otello *(opening)*

Emilia, what's happened?

Emilia *(entering)*

There's been a murder!

Cassio killed Roderigo.

Otello

And Cassio?

Emilia

Lives.

Otello

Cassio lives then!

Desdemona *(from the bed)*

I'm killed unjustly...

I have been killed unjustly...

Emilia *(running to the bed)*

What is that cry? Oh God!

Desdemona

I am not guilty...

Emilia

Oh Heaven! But who...

who did this?

Desdemona

Ah, no one...

my own hand... and tell my lord I never

wronged him...

In death I love him...

Farewell...

(She dies.)

Otello

Oh, she's a liar!

I have killed her.

Emilia

Cruel murderer!

Otello

She was Cassio's mistress.

Just ask Iago.

Emilia

Ask Iago?

Otello

Ask Iago!

Emilia

Madman! And you believed him?

Otello

You dare deny it?

(He springs towards Emilia.)

Emilia

I don't fear you.

Otello *(He seizes hold of her.)*

Silence!

Emilia *(She frees herself and runs towards the door, crying out at the top of her voice.)*

Come here! Come help me!

Come help me!

Otello's murdered Desdemona.

Scene 4

Otello, Emilia, Lodovico, Cassio, Iago, then

Montano with armed attendants

All (except Otello and Emilia)

¹⁸ Who's shouting! Oh God! Ah no!

Emilia *(to Iago)*

Iago, reveal all the truth to this madman.

Did you believe that Desdemona betrayed him?

Answer!

Iago

So I believed.

Otello

That lovely kerchief that once I gave her,
to Cassio she freely gave it.

Emilia

O you powers defend us!

Iago *(to Emilia)*

Quiet.

Emilia

No.

All shall be told!

Iago

Silence.

Emilia

No! That handkerchief was taken from my hand,
was seized from me by Iago.

Cassio

That handkerchief I found in my room today.

Montano (*entering and pointing at Iago*)

Roderigo confessed it as he died, he revealed all
Iago's plotting.

Otello (*to Iago*)

Ah! Deny the charge!

Iago (*fleeing*)

No.

Lodovico

Stop him!

Montano

Pursue him.

(*Exit some, in pursuit of Iago.*)

All

Set a guard on him!

Otello (*lunging for his sword*)

O Heaven, have you no lightning left?

Lodovico

Give me your sword!

Otello

You dare to?!

¹⁹ Do not fear me,
though I still have my sword here.

Life's weary journey has reached its end.

Oh! Glory! Otello's done.

(*He lets fall the sword. He goes over to the bed
and gazes upon Desdemona.*)

And you...

how deathly pale you are!

So weary, so silent, and lovely.

Ill-fated gentle creature born of a star of evil.

Cold now, cold as your pure tender virtue,

and gone to Heaven.

Desdemona! Desdemona!... Ah!...

Dead!... Dead!... Dead now!...

(*stealthily taking a dagger from his clothes*)

I still am armed!

(*He stabs himself.*)

Cassio

Ah! Stop him!

All

Oh, Otello!

Otello

Before I killed you... wife...

first I kissed you.

Now I'm dying... I lie in shades of darkness...

I kiss you... again I kiss you...

once more I kiss you...

(*He dies.*)

Curtain.

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Charles Craig as Otello and Neil Howlett as Otello



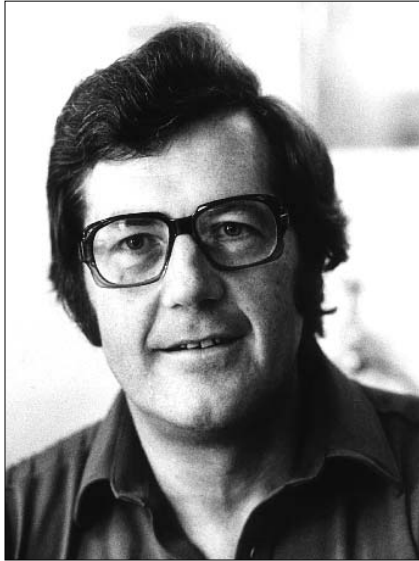
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Rosalind Plowright

125



Neil Howlett

Reg Wilson



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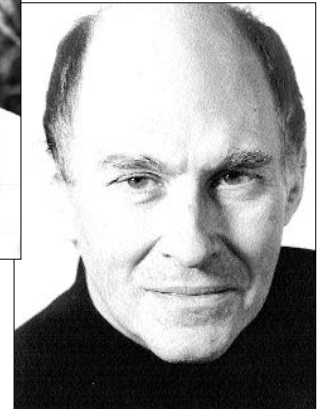
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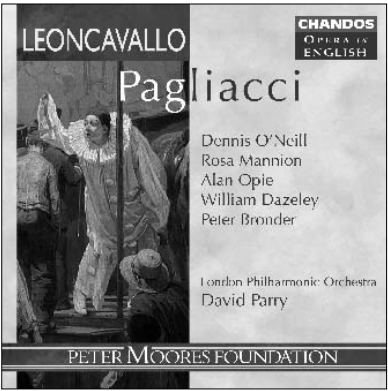


Malcolm Rivers

Opera in English on Chandos



CHAN 3004



CHAN 3003

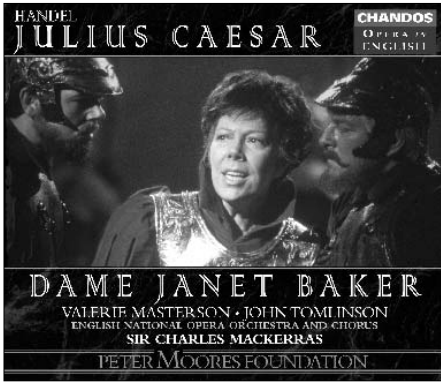


CHAN 3029

Opera in English on Chandos



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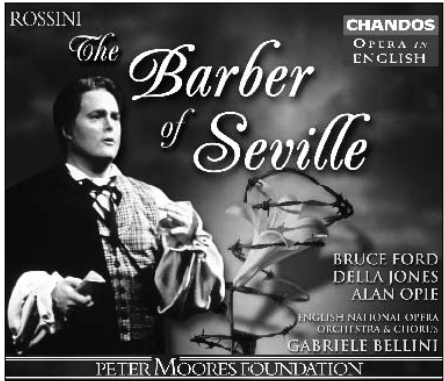


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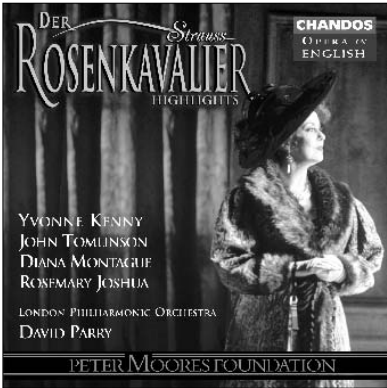
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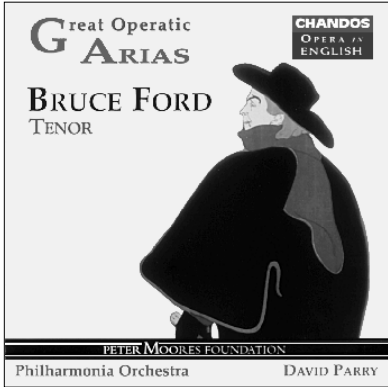
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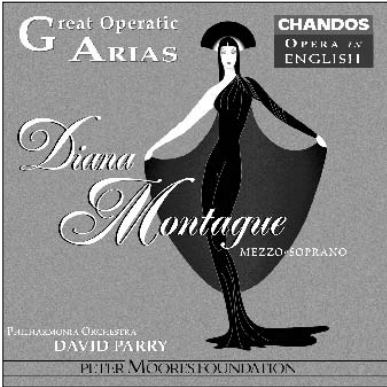
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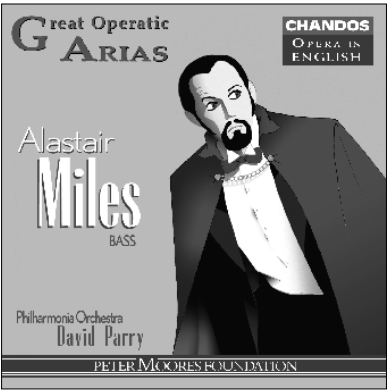
Opera in English on Chandos



CHAN 3013



CHAN 3035



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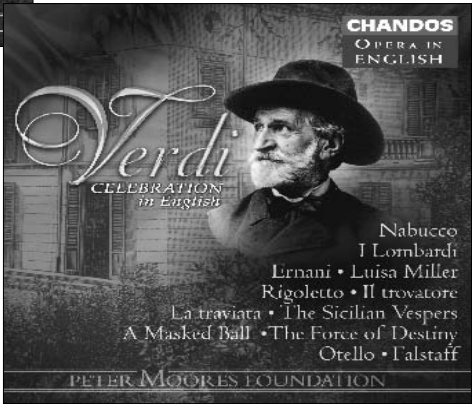


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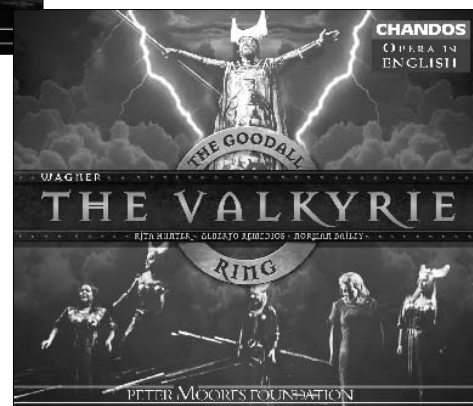
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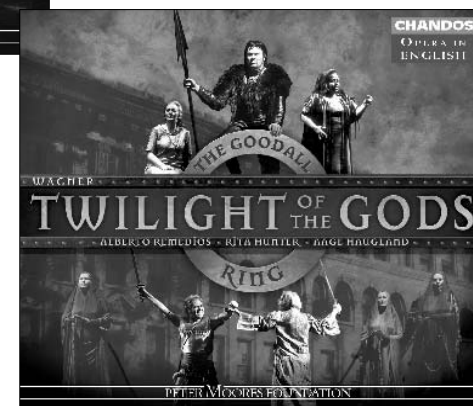
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Photos of English National Opera's 1983 production of *Otello* by Reg Wilson

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Musical assistant: Peter Robinson

Recording producer John Fraser

Sound engineer Stuart Eltham

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OTELLO

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Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)

Dramma lirico in four acts

Libretto by Arrigo Boito after Shakespeare, English translation by Andrew Porter

Otello, a Moor, general of the Venetian army **Charles Craig** *tenor*
Desdemona, Otello's wife **Rosalind Plowright** *soprano*
Iago, an ensign **Neil Howlett** *baritone*
Emilia, Iago's wife **Shelagh Squires** *mezzo-soprano*
Cassio, a platoon leader **Bonaventura Bottone** *tenor*
Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman **Stuart Kale** *tenor*
Lodovico, an ambassador of the Venetian Republic **Sean Rea** *bass*
Montano, Otello's predecessor as Governor of Cyprus **Malcolm Rivers** *baritone*
Herald **Gordon Traynor** *baritone*

English National Opera Orchestra and Chorus
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