

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Spain and Italy, 19th Century

ACT I: Spain, at the palace of the Marquis of Calatrava in Seville

ACT II, Scene 1: An inn near Hornachuelos

Scene 2: The cloister of the Madonna degli Angeli in Spain

Intermission

ACT III, Scene 1: Italy, near Velletri, ten years later

Scene 2: The trenches on a battlefield

Scene 3: A ruined village, a few months later

Intermission

ACT IV: Spain, five years later

Scene 1: Interior of the cloister of the Madonna degli Angeli

Scene 2: A hermitage near the cloister

ACT I

In his palace in Seville, the Marquis of Calatrava bids goodnight to his daughter, Leonora. He warns her against her suitor, Don Alvaro, an Incan prince, then departs. Leonora's maid, Curra, continues preparations for Leonora's imminent elopement with Alvaro. Leonora is having second thoughts ("Me pellegrina ed orfana"), but when Alvaro appears he convinces her anew ("Ah! Seguirti fino agl'ultimi"). Suddenly, the marquis storms in. When Alvaro attempts to make peace by throwing down his pistol, the weapon goes off accidentally, mortally wounding the marquis, who dies cursing his daughter. The lovers flee.

ACT II

Separated from Alvaro during their escape, Leonora, in male attire, is now in

flight from her vengeful brother, Carlo. The siblings arrive at the same village inn, but Carlo doesn't recognize his sister. Preziosilla, a lively Gypsy, regales the crowd with a hymn to war ("Al suon del tamburo"), and Leonora leaves without being discovered ("Padre Eterno Signor"). After annoying the peddler Trabuco with his persistent questions, Carlo tells his own story ("Son Pereda"), but pretends that it is about someone else. At the end of his narrative, the company disbands.

Leonora, seeking refuge at a Franciscan monastery, prays for forgiveness ("Madre, pietosa Vergine"); she asks the talkative Friar Melitone if she may speak with the Father Superior, Padre Guardiano. When she reveals her situation, the compassionate Padre Guardiano offers her sanctuary, and Leonora goes off to an isolated

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hermitage to spend her life in penitence (“La Vergine degli Angeli”).

ACT III

Alvaro has joined the Spanish army in Italy, using an alias. Believing Leonora dead, he broods on his past (“Oh tu che in seno agli angeli”). A noisy quarrel over a card game interrupts his thoughts, and he rescues a fellow officer from the ensuing brawl. It is Carlo, also in disguise.

The two pledge undying friendship and are immediately called to battle, where Alvaro is gravely wounded. When Carlo tells him he has won the Cross of Calatrava, Alvaro shudders at the name. Believing he is dying, Alvaro entrusts to his new friend a small folio containing a sealed letter and a medallion, saying the letter is to be burned unopened at his death. Carlo gives his word (“Solenne in quest’ora”), and Alvaro is carried out by the surgeon. Musing on the mysterious folio and his friend’s violent reaction to the name of Calatrava, Carlo begins to wonder if this could be his enemy Alvaro. After wrestling with his conscience (“Urna fatale”), Carlo rationalizes that the medallion is not part of his oath and, opening it, finds Leonora’s portrait. The surgeon returns with word that Alvaro will live, and Carlo rejoices that he can now confront his enemy (“Egli è salvo!”).

A few months later in the ruins of a war-ravaged village, Preziosilla, soldiers, and the local peasants sing of the war. They are interrupted by Trabuco peddling his goods. Just as he leaves, starving beggars arrive to ask for bread. They are comforted by homesick

recruits. Preziosilla breaks the mood by beginning a wild tarantella. In the midst of this drunken merriment Melitone appears and criticizes their immoral behavior (“Toh, toh...Poffare il mondo”). They chase him away and join Preziosilla in another war song (“Rataplan!”). When the crowd disperses, Carlo seeks out the recovered Alvaro and reveals his identity, challenging his foe to a duel. Alvaro, learning that Leonora is alive, tries to pacify Carlo, suggesting they search for her together. When Carlo reveals that he intends to kill his own sister, Alvaro readily draws his sword, but they are separated by a patrol. Alvaro resolves to enter a monastery.

ACT IV

At the monastery, Melitone grudgingly doles out soup to beggars while Padre Guardiano reminds him that humility is a virtue (“Del mondo i disinganni”). Carlo, who has tracked Alvaro to his sanctuary (“Invano, Alvaro”), arrives and sends for his foe. Alvaro, true to his monk’s vows, repeatedly refuses to fight, until Carlo sparks his anger with an insult to his heritage. The two rush off to duel.

At the nearby hermitage, Leonora prays for peace (“Pace, pace, mio Dio!”); she still loves Alvaro and longs for death. At the sound of fighting, she hides. Carlo and Alvaro enter dueling and Carlo is dealt a fatal blow. Alvaro rings the bell at the hermitage, seeking last rites for the dying man. Finding himself face to face with Leonora, he admits to wounding her brother. She goes to tend him but Carlo, vengeful to the end, stabs her. As she dies, she and Padre

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Guardiano urge Alvaro to seek salvation in God (“Non imprecare”).

—*Courtesy of OPERA NEWS*

NOTES ON LA FORZA DEL DESTINO

La *Forza del Destino* “is an opera of vast dimensions and needs great care”; these are Verdi’s words shortly after the premiere of the work at the Imperial Theater, St. Petersburg, on November 10, 1862. In the manner of his beloved Shakespeare, the composer had chosen as the basis for his 24th opera a drama that included both scenes of tragedy and comedy, written by Spanish playwright Angel de Saavedra, Duke of Rivas. To ensure an optimum balance between the two, he told his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, to add an extended comic scene to Act III, which is set in a military camp. The section was to be based on a colorful interlude in Friedrich Schiller’s dramatic trilogy about the Thirty Years War, *Wallenstein*. Verdi had already planned to use Schiller’s picturesque camp scene more than a dozen years before in *L’Assedio di Firenze* (“The Siege of Florence”), a work he never completed after it had been forbidden by the Neapolitan censors and ultimately replaced with *Luisa Miller* (first performed in Naples, 1849). And it is the comic scenes in *Forza*, perhaps even more than their tragic counterparts, that require our attention.

As with *Stiffelio*, *La Traviata*, *Simon Boccanegra*, and *Don Carlo*, at first *Forza* was not a box office success, and Verdi felt compelled to revise the opera. While preparing for the premiere of that revi-

sion, the composer shared his thoughts about a trio of vocalists who had little to do with the tragic aspects of the drama. “Don’t forget that in *Forza* three artists with great stage presence are needed to do Preziosilla, Melitone, and Trabuco. Their scenes are comedy, nothing but comedy, therefore good pronunciation and aplomb on stage.” The opera’s mezzo-soprano, Preziosilla, is a young, attractive Gypsy fortune teller. She provides the focal point for the two most extended comic sections: the scene at the inn in Act II and the military encampment scene mentioned earlier. Friar Melitone, a baritone, is an irascible, sharp-tongued lay brother who momentarily lightens the otherwise somber monastery scenes of Acts II and IV and delivers a comic sermon in the encampment scene of the intervening act. Trabuco, a tenor, appears twice in the opera. First he is a muleteer at the inn (Act II) where he has some cleverly evasive answers for the opera’s villain, the baritone Don Carlo. During the encampment scene Trabuco becomes a peddler with a comic aria of his own.

Since Preziosilla acts as a recruiter for a war in Italy during the inn scene, she, Trabuco, and the Spanish peasants and servants reappear more or less logically in Act III, joined by Melitone, who is now a wandering preacher. The Spanish and Italians are allied in war against the Germans. “Morte ai tedeschi” (“Death to the Germans”) is a line in the 1862 libretto that was certain to resonate powerfully for Italian audiences of the time inasmuch as the Italians, together with the French, had just fought a successful war of liberation against the Austrians in 1859. As a result, for the

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first time since the days of the Romans, Italy was a free and united nation. The specific war referred to in Act III of *Forza* is that of the Austrian Succession (1740–1747), and the reason the Spanish were involved is that the ruler of the largest independent region in Italy during the 18th century, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (Naples and the remainder of southern Italy as well as the island of Sicily), was a Spanish nobleman, Don Carlos of Bourbon, a son of Philip the Fifth of Spain. The Italian city of Velletri is located in the region between Rome and Naples.

Because the hero of the opera, Don Alvaro, is an Incan, despite his noble birth he is still an Indian and therefore not acceptable to the Spanish aristocrat, the Marquis of Calatrava, as a husband for his daughter, Leonora. It is easy to miss, but at one point in the libretto there is a reference to Alvaro's dark skin—shades of Otello, the Moor of Venice. Leonora's indecision about whether or not to elope with Alvaro near the beginning of the opera leads not only to her beautiful aria "Me pellegrina ed orfana," but also to the entry of her infuriated father, who is then killed quite accidentally when Alvaro throws away his pistol and it fires on striking the ground. As with other bizarre operatic events (for example, the incident related in *Il Trovatore* of a distraught Azucena accidentally throwing her own son on the fire in place of the Count di Luna's child), we must recognize and ultimately accept the strange event of the pistol as the central plot thread of the drama. As Shakespeare and the Greek dramatists have taught us, man is not always in control of his destiny. In this particular

tragedy it is "The Power of Destiny" ("La Forza del Destino") that contrives at every turn to frustrate the happiness of Leonora and Alvaro.

With Verdi directing the rehearsals and conducting the earliest performances of the revised opera (La Scala, Milan, February 1869), the work was a great success. This was, incidentally, the first time in almost 25 years that the composer had allowed a premiere of one of his operas at Milan's leading theater, scene of his earliest successes: *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi*. It is characteristic of his later operas that while he credited fine performances by Teresa Stolz (Leonora) and Mario Tiberini (Alvaro), he also attributed a great share of the success of *Forza* that season to what he referred to as *le masse* ("the groups"). In a letter dated March 1, 1869, he wrote to one of his friends, the Count Opprandino Arrivabene: "Le masse, the choruses and orchestra, have performed with precision and a fire indescribable. They had the devil inside of them." In the same letter he goes on to describe two of the most important revisions. "The new pieces [include] an overture performed marvelously by the orchestra...and a Terzetto with which the opera ends." For the original version of the opera Verdi had written a much shorter prelude, and at the end of the work, following the deaths of Don Carlo and Leonora, Alvaro committed suicide by leaping from a cliff. In that version the audience actually saw a large puppet thrown from a height at the back of the stage. The suicide, an unforgivable sin for Catholics, probably bothered audiences in predominantly Catholic countries more than the large number of deaths in

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the opera. These countries, which included Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Bavaria, and the lands of Latin America, were precisely the areas of the world where Verdi's operas were most frequently performed during his lifetime. After searching far and wide for a new dramatic solution, Verdi finally settled on the ending we know today: Alvaro is dissuaded from attempting suicide, and instead allows himself to be persuaded to spend the remainder of his life repenting for his sins.

It seems noteworthy that Verdi, who was not a practicing Catholic, wrote some of his most beautiful religious (though not liturgical) music in *La Forza del Destino*. This includes the lovely offstage chorus of pilgrims whose singing momentarily interrupts the lively action of the inn scene in Act II, as well as the monks' chorus in the same act. Verdi also composed extraordinarily effective music relating well to the religious setting of the monastery for Leonora and Padre Guardiano in the same scene. Perhaps most successful of all is Leonora's stunning prayer, "Pace, pace, mio Dio," in Act IV, probably the best known single piece in the opera. That same serious tone permeates the final terzet, which begins with the sympathetic figure of Guardiano, the abbot of the monastery, admonishing Alvaro "Non imprecare" ("Do not curse").

In a letter about a performance of *Forza* in Vicenza shortly after the Scala success, Verdi wrote about the uncontrolled enthusiasm of a friend:

He's gone completely mad. The solo and duet pieces of Colini [Don Carlo], Stolz [Leonora], and Fraschini [Verdi's favorite tenor as Alvaro] went to his head and will end up by putting him in the hospital. But [of] the varied scenes, more vast, which fill up half of the opera, and which truly constitute the Music Drama, he, like the public, doesn't speak at all.... I believe, and am convinced, that the musical pieces for solo or [two] solo voices may have been delivered wonderfully, but that the opera, understand me well, opera of serious Musical Theater [Verdi's term is *Dramma scenico-musicale*], was performed only imperfectly.

In closing, here is a final comment by the composer about the first of what he described as his "modern operas," *La Forza del Destino*. (The others he placed in this category were *Don Carlo*, *Aida*, and, of course, later *Otello* and *Falstaff*, although by the time of his last stage works he no longer used the term "modern" to describe his operas.) Late in the year 1869, Verdi made a remark that might well serve as a guiding principle for all directors of the composer's later operas:

A magnificent voice, a sublime artist does not suffice to make comprehensible in all its aspects the *Opera-Poem* of our times. There must be the totality, the singing, the playing, the acting, the costumes, the scenery, everything must form the complex.

—Martin Chusid
