

# CLASS 9 : MANAGING MELODRAMA

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## A. BACK TO THE ORIGINAL

1. Class title 1 (Kusej production)
2. Section title A (St. Petersburg poster and set design)

By 1862, when he wrote *La forza del destino* (The Force of Destiny), **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901) had attained a high reputation both at home and abroad. He had been elected a member of the first Italian national parliament, and major commissions were coming in from abroad: *Forza* was written for Saint Petersburg, *Don Carlos* would be premiered in Paris, and *Aida* in Cairo. It so happens that we have a DVD of *Forza* from Saint Petersburg, using sets built from the original designs. This does not necessarily mean that the performance itself is authentic—styles of acting, directing, and lighting have changed—but it is as close as we are ever likely to get. Unfortunately, it also goes to show why *Forza* is such an infernally difficult opera to bring off. Let me play short scenes from near the beginning and end of this production, with a few shorter clips in between.

### 3. Character chart 1

There are really only four important characters: **Leonora** and **Don Carlo**, the children of the **Marquess of Calatrava**, and the South American **Don Alvaro**, who claims to be the son of an Inca King. Actually, the Marquess does not appear after the first scene and Don Carlo does not appear until the second, so there is a maximum of three characters at any one time. Leonora and Don Alvaro love one another, but the Marquess disapproves. But once he has gone to bed, she sneaks Alvaro into the house, they have a brief love duet, and are just about to elope when the Marquess walks in.

4. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, end of Act I (St. Petersburg)
5. Character chart 2

**That's it, the mainspring of the entire plot**, a one-in-a-million coincidence: a gun going off when thrown down in an act of submission, and happening to kill the other character. But coincidence is the stuff of melodrama, and everything will follow from this moment. Leonora and Don Alvaro flee, but get separated. Don Carlo swears to hunt them both down and kill them. The next scene takes place months or even years later. We are in a tavern. Leonora, who is traveling in disguise as a man, comes upon her brother, who is also in disguise as a student. She realizes that he intends to kill her, and knows she will have to seek refuge. Here is a clip from the middle of the act; much as in *Tannhäuser*, the people are inspired by a group of pilgrims going by outside, and join in their prayers. There is a strong religious thread running all the way through the opera.

6. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, prayer in Act II (St. Petersburg)

Leonora does seek refuge, going to a nearby monastery and obtaining permission to spend the rest of her days in a hermit's cell. Here is a snatch of her ceremony of commitment, with part of the lovely aria "La vergine degl'angeli."

7. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, end of Act II (St. Petersburg)
8. Scene chart 1

We are now at the end of Act II, halfway through the four-act opera. Question: Where has the action been so far? There was that brief moment of the gun going off in the prelude; it is important, but really no more than back-story, part of the exposition. All the rest is exposition too. Don Alvaro has disappeared. Donna Leonora has hidden herself away as a hermit. And Don Carlo is still in disguise, still looking. No other Verdi opera accomplishes so little by the halfway point.

#### 9. Don Alvaro and Don Carlo (St. Petersburg)

There *is* a lot of action in the second half, though, and almost all of it concerns the two men. Again, much time has passed. Don Alvaro and Don Carlo have both enlisted as officers in the Spanish army, both under false names, and both are serving in southern Italy. Alvaro saves Carlo from some bandits, and the two swear eternal friendship, in a duet that is quite perfunctory beside the friendship duet in Verdi's next opera, *Don Carlos*. In the very next scene, though, Alvaro will be wounded and confide the key to a secret box to Carlo in the event of his death. Carlo opens the box, discovers a portrait of his sister, and realizes who Alvaro is. So when Alvaro recovers, Carlo challenges him to a duel. Here are short clips of both sequences.

10. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, friendship duet in Act III (St. Petersburg)
11. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, challenge scene in Act III (St. Petersburg)

The rapid change from lifelong brotherhood to deathly enmity would be too much even in a melodrama, so Verdi pads it out with scenes of comedy and local color—another thing that makes this a difficult opera to stage. I won't have time to play any of them at length, but here is a brief sample.

12. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, dance sequence in Act III (St. Petersburg)
13. Poster, 1870

Their fight is stopped by other soldiers. Alvaro decides to enter a monastery, which just happens to be the same one that accepted Leonora years before. Many years now pass, but once again, Carlo tracks Alvaro down and renews his challenge. They go offstage. Now Leonora, who was entirely absent from the long Act III and the first half of Act IV, emerges from her hermitage in the middle of this final act to sing a long and very famous aria that we shall hear near the end of the second hour. Immediately after this, the two men enter, and we get the final working-out of the tragedy.

14. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, excerpt from Act IV (St. Petersburg)
15. Character chart 3
16. Scene chart 2

In the original (though not in Verdi's later revision) Don Alvaro throws himself over a cliff, thus completing the frankly-absurd body-count shown here! But there is another problem, or rather an extension of the point I made before. Leonora, who dominated the first half, is almost absent in the second, until Verdi makes up for it with her big aria; and the lovers are only together for a 7-minute duet at the start and a 50-second reunion at the end. That's quite a list of problems: plot depending almost entirely on coincidence; long time-span; uneven distribution of scenes; and extreme juxtapositions of genre—anyone want to add anything? If you are just prepared to say "Hey, it's opera!" these probably won't worry you, but fewer operagoers *are* prepared to say that these days.

## B. CIRCLE OF SANCTITY [10:20]

### 17. Section title B (opening image of Kusej production)

Despite the title of my course, I can't assert that it is possible to solve *all* these problems. But finding a non-clichéd narrative approach and fielding a strong cast of singing actors will go a long way towards making this opera work. I have found trailers to four productions that I would like to see complete: two by directors we know (**Christof Loy** in Amsterdam and **Tobias Kratzer** in Frankfurt) and two by people we have not encountered before in this course (**Andreas Homoki** in Zurich and **Martin Kusej** in Munich). I will post them all on the website, but for the rest of the day I will be showing the Kusej, as it is the only one I can get with titles.

*Kusej tries to avoid melodrama of these random events by both stabilizing the story in terms of its tight family circle, and showing it in the wider context of a disturbed and violent world.* The first point I can demonstrate fairly easily; the other is more difficult, but I'll try. He begins by staging the very famous overture (written after the St. Petersburg premiere, which had only a brief prelude). I'll play the first half, to the sudden pause in the music; what do you make of it? The conductor is the Israeli **Asher Fisch**.

### 18. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, overture, first half (Munich)

#### 19. — still from the above

So what do you think Martin Kusej was after with this? Patriarchy, power, and religion, I would say. Leonora is obviously anxious about something, and we will find out what it is in the scene with Alvaro that follows soon after the Marquess has retired for the night. Up to now, I have played only clips of 2½ minutes or less; now I'll give you almost 12 minutes at once, going right through the end of this act and into the beginning of the next. Can you see what is going on? The singers are **Anja Harteros** and **Jonas Kaufmann**; you can't really get much better.

### 20. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, Act I love duet and start of Act II (Munich)

#### 21. — still from the above

What happens in this change? First of all, note the continuity between the two scenes. The family dining table is still there (it will remain for the whole opera, actually). The dead body of the Marquess is still

lying on the floor. Carlo, the boy in a green sweater and tie, has now grown up, so Kusej is greatly extending the time-line. And whereas the score sets the scene in a tavern, this is clearly some bombed out building, where refugees come for handouts of bottled water and packaged food; I have always felt that the downwards inflection of the opening *Holàs* are surprisingly low-key for a Verdi crowd scene, and this works well here. But it is also part of Kusej's larger contextualization of the story amid the dysfunction of the modern world; more about that in the second hour

## 22. Anja Harteros as Leonora in *La forza del destino* (Munich, 2016)

The table is still in place for Leonora's visit to the monastery. I find Kusej very canny in his choice of setting. The folding wooden screen is exactly what you see in a large church hall dividing off one section from another, but it also has overtones of business and commercial culture. And his portrayal of the **Padre Guardiano** (Father Superior) is surely corporate, even mafioso—wait till you see how he casts it. The church space is something altogether more modern than the original one from Saint Petersburg, and it seems to be a different denomination entirely. Indeed, I would ask you, what do you think is Kusej's attitude to the role of religion in this whole thing? I'll play the aria—listen for its grand soaring phrases—and final scene back to back.

23. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, Act II, "Pace, pace, mio Dio" (Munich)

24. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, Act II finale (Munich)

25. Class title 2 (Sanctity or Power?)

So what about the role of religion, at least in this production? Why did Kusej cast the Padre Guardiano with the same singer (**Vitalij Kowaljow**) as the Marchese?

## C. HONOR AND REVENGE [11:10]

### 26. Section title C (Kaufmann and Tézier)

If the first half of the opera was mainly about Leonora, the second half is almost entirely about the men, **Alvaro** and **Carlo**. Act Three opens in Italy, where the Spanish forces are aiding the Neapolitans repel invasion by the Austrians (this is true). **Martin Kusej**, though, sets it in another ruin with overtones of an altogether less benevolent occupation of one country by the armies of another. I'll play just the opening; tell me what it suggests to you?

27. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, Act III opening (Munich)

28. — still from the above

I assume you picked up the references? Kusej is evoking shadows of **Abu Ghraib**, the prison in Iraq. You won't have recognized him, because you haven't seen him yet in this production, but Don Carlo was one of the captors. Don Alvaro, though, is horrified by what he sees. You saw him relieving one prisoner; at the end of the long prelude to the aria he would now sing, he throws up offstage, before exclaiming that he wants only to die. However, we have another shorter aria from him in a minute, and I haven't

time for a long one. So let's jump ahead to the 12-minute sequence where he meets Don Carlo for the first time, although both men have signed up under false names. Verdi has accustomed us to granting him long expanses of time in this opera, so the rapid dramatic switchbacks of this scene is something quite extraordinary. The Carlo is **Ludovic Tézier**.

29. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, Act III battle &c (Munich)

30. — still from the above

Once he suspects that Alvaro might be the man who killed his father, we know that Carlo will open the box and find Leonora's portrait, but he delays long enough to sing an aria first. He delays several weeks more, until Alvaro has fully recovered, before challenging him to a duel. Alvaro refuses, protesting his innocence and their friendship, but when Carlo taunts him about his mixed blood, he accepts. It is a terrific scene, ended only when their companions pull the two men apart, but its structure is almost identical to the more famous duet in Act IV, so I will omit it now and cut directly to the last 26 minutes of the opera, which I shall play unbroken.

31. Act IV/2 of *La forza del destino* (Munich, 2016)

To do so, we jump ahead another five years. Alvaro has joined a monastery and taken the name Fra Raffaello. But Carlo has tracked him down, and delights in the prospect of a long-delayed vengeance in his arioso "Invano, Alvaro," the first section of one of the most famous baritone-tenor duets in all of Verdi. The scene then switches to **Leonora's** cave, shown here, and her famous aria "Pace, paci, mio Dio." Even before there is time for any applause, the men break in. Alvaro has fatally wounded Carlo, and calls for the hermit to hear his confession. We heard the Saint Petersburg version of this scene earlier, but Verdi changed the ending for Italy, writing more of those floating wisps of melody for his dying soprano. Do you think it is a satisfactory ending, and does Kusej make it more so, or less?

32. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, Act IV, duet, "Invano, Alvaro" (Munich)

33. Verdi: *La forza del destino*, Act IV, aria, and finale (Munich)

34. Class title 3