

GIUSEPPE VERDI

OTELLO

Otello, opera in four acts by Giuseppe Verdi , libretto by Arrigo Boito, based on Shakespeare's play Othello. Verdi's penultimate opera, first performed at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, on February 5, 1887.

Domestic violence. It's older than the Bible and as fresh as the morning news. No wonder composer Giuseppe Verdi was coaxed out of his firmly declared retirement by Boito's libretto for an opera based on Shakespeare's Othello. The story has all the ingredients of high drama – passionate love, raging jealousy, revenge, murder and suicide.

Otello is often considered Verdi's towering achievement. The composer's profound musical insights into Shakespeare's tragedy illuminate the hero's tragic journey to self-destruction. Set in the late 15th century, Otello begins with a roiling storm pummeling the shores of Cyprus. A decorated Venetian general and governor of the island, Otello returns with his triumphant fleet. They have defeated the hated Turks. Otello's position at this time is that of a general in the service of Venice. He is denied the social acceptance he so covets because of his color. He is not Venetian, and some consider him to be a soldier of fortune. Otello is used to living in the military. In society, the rules are different. Soldiers always play by the rules - socialites do not. Even when Otello had "arrived" as Governor, he still found that people sometimes only tolerated his position, or pretended to. They plotted to dishonor him, but that was to be expected. His wife Desdemona was the one person Otello thought he could count on--the one person whose honesty was unquestionable.

Things turn sour quickly as Iago, Otello's ensign, plots the general's demise. One of the most thoroughly crafted villains in literature and opera, Iago seethes with hatred. Expecting advancement, he has been passed over for a younger, less intelligent man. Cassio, whom Iago disdains, will be promoted instead.

Throughout, we see Iago's mind at work. He has honed his talents into sharp instruments of destruction, practiced control over his body, expressions, emotions, actions and thoughts. He is evil incarnate and takes perverse pride and pleasure in acting upon his urges. His motivation: "I am evil because I am a man." He reveals his plot against Cassio and, ultimately, Otello. First Iago instigates a fight between Roderigo and Cassio, a young man who happens to secretly love Otello's beautiful wife, Desdemona. It doesn't end well, and Otello retracts Cassio's advancement. But Act I ends sweetly as husband and wife sing a love duet.

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Iago concocts more mischief in Act II. He insinuates infidelity between Desdemona and Cassio with a simple ruse. Desdemona's handkerchief, a gift from Otello, falls into the wrong hands. By the end of Act II, Otello believes Iago's lies, and the great general turns on his wife. Act III

belongs to Otello and the handkerchief. He is alternately consumed by anger, disbelief and self-pity as Desdemona's betrayal seems true.

Venetian ambassadors arrive and call Otello back to the mainland and appoint Cassio governor. Musically complex and psychologically brilliant, the scene explodes when Otello loses control, hurls insults at everyone, shoves Desdemona to the floor and clears the room. Only Iago stands by with a conspiratorial smirk as the general collapses.

Act IV finds Desdemona in her bedchamber. She sings an aria about a forsaken woman then a prayer, the famous "Ave Maria," and falls asleep. Otello enters and wakes her with a kiss, a prelude to one of the most horrific scenes in opera. With news of Cassio killing Roderigo, Emilia, Desdemona's maid, desperately enters and Iago's plot is finally revealed. Otello recognizes Desdemona's innocence – too late – and kills himself.