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"*Love's the meaning of the universe*": On Franz Werfel's German Translation of Verdi's Opera *Simon Boccanegra*

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Abstract. The German Verdi renaissance movement of the 1920s and 1930s is closely linked to the Austrian writer and poet Franz Werfel. At the beginning of the 20th century, most of the composer's earlier works had sunk into oblivion, with only a handful of his operas, such as *Rigoletto* and *Aida*, being regularly performed.

Particularly in German-speaking countries, Verdi's operatic works were overshadowed by Wagner's musical dramas, and often disparagingly referred to as "organ grinder's music". Werfel, who since his youth had been an ardent admirer of Verdi, started championing the composer's cause in the 1920s by publishing a biographical novel, as well as a German edition of Verdi's letters. Furthermore, and most importantly, he translated three of the composer's lesser-known operas, thus inaugurating the Verdi renaissance on German and, subsequently, international stages. This paper examines the translation of *Simon Boccanegra*, the second opera in Werfel's triad, which premiered in Vienna in 1930.

Keywords: Giuseppe Verdi, Franz Werfel, Simon Boccanegra, German Verdi renaissance

In the years prior to his death in 1901, Giuseppe Verdi had the reputation of being the world's greatest living composer. However, by this time only a comparatively small part of his œuvre, including half a dozen operas and the *Requiem*, were regularly performed, many works from his early and middle periods being forgotten or, at least, not canonised [1, *165-6*]. In German-speaking countries, in particular, Verdi's operatic œuvre was overshadowed by Wagner's musical dramas and, though popular with theatre audiences (one Viennese critic, in 1901, called Verdi and Offenbach "*die Schutzpatrone der Opernkasse*" ["*the patrons of the opera box office*"] [2]), was often referred to as second-rate "organ grinder's music" [3, *54*; 4, 11, *29-30*]. Furthermore, the works were performed in 19th century translations, which were often imprecise and notorious for their kitschy language, ironically denominated "Operndeutsch" ("operatic German").

The situation started to improve when, on the occasion of the centenary of Verdi's birth in 1913, efforts were made to revive some of his forgotten operas, as well as to re-evaluate the artistic quality of his music. After the hiatus caused by WWI, it was, in the 1920s, mainly due to the Prague-born poet Franz Werfel that a movement was

inaugurated which went down in musical history as the German Verdi renaissance. Werfel, who since his youth had been an ardent admirer of Verdi [3, *7*-], started championing the composer's cause by publishing a best-selling biographical novel, as well as a German edition of Verdi's letters. Furthermore, and most importantly, he translated three of the composer's lesser-known operas, thus launching the Verdi revival on German and, subsequently, international stages.

Through his then companion, and later wife, Alma Mahler-Werfel, he was acquainted with the work of Gustav Mahler, who during his term as director of the Vienna Court Opera reformed the performance practice of Mozart and other composers, by not only renewing the productions and set designs but also by having older text translations revised or the libretti translated anew. Moreover, it can be assumed that Werfel's Verdi translations were part of the "Geldbeschaffungsprogramm" ("money acquisition programme") initiated by Alma to maintain the couple's standard of living and, in particular, to acquire their homes in Venice and, later, at Vienna's Hohe Warte. It was largely due to Alma's efforts that Werfel was "converted" from an expressionist poet into the best-selling novelist of *Verdi* or *The Song of Bernadette* [5, *203-4*, *235*, *247*-].

With regard to the reasons which prompted the German Verdi renaissance, it has not only been viewed as a reaction to the exclusiveness of Wagnerism and modernism [4, *100*], but also as a result of an "opera crisis" [4, *54*-], of changes in the sociological composition of audiences at that time, namely the declining importance of the upper middle classes [4, *11*] [6, *183*], and of the general cultural climate after the defeat of Germany and Austria in WWI [6, *184-5*]. However, these factors are not instrumental in interpreting a phenomenon which can sufficiently, and with higher plausibility, be explained by economic considerations, the competition from operetta and cinema [6, *184*] and the lack of popular operatic novelties, particularly after Puccini's death, with audiences preferring old-fashioned "melody" to musical modernism. Or, as the (anonymous) *Times* correspondent asked on the occasion of the Berlin premiere of Werfel's *Boccanegra* translation: "*If the opera is a success – how far would that be due to a reaction against the symbolical librettos and obstreperous orchestras of modern operas*?" [7]

It seems that neither veristic nor late Romantic or modernist contemporary composers could, in the long run, provide an operatic repertoire suitable to feed the appetite of audiences whose musical taste had not changed much since the *fin de siècle* [8, *38*]. It is not by chance that the last long-time bestseller in the history of opera is Puccini's *Turandot*, which premiered posthumously in 1926 [8, *38*]. The Handel and Offenbach revivals running parallel to the Verdi renaissance on German stages [3, *39*-] can also be seen as the outcome of anti-modernist, retrospective tendencies in repertoire planning.

Furthermore, German theatres were, from 1929, heavily affected by the economic crisis, with many of them being closed or amalgamated. Werfel himself once lamented, somewhat exaggeratedly, that major opera houses could only survive by playing *Im weißen Rössl* (*The White Horse Inn*) three times a week [9, *328*]. Obviously, theatre managers could not afford to play to empty houses and were only too eager to repeat the financial success of the canonised Verdi operas by adding some of his lesser-known works to their programmes.

Werfel's first Verdi translation, *La forza del destino* (*Die Macht des Schicksals*, in German), premiered in 1926 in Dresden, not only initiated the Verdi renaissance on German stages, inspiring the revival of other non-canonical Verdi operas such as *Macbeth*, *Nabucco* and *Luisa Miller*, but was also the movement's greatest success, with productions in some 45 theatres in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Czechoslovakia. The work was subsequently "re-imported" to Italy in its original language and also staged in many other countries. Ever since WWII, it has been part of the standard repertoire of all major opera houses.

However, *Forza* was no real rediscovery of Werfel's, as it had already been revived in Italy, Germany and the USA earlier in the century. The same is true of his reworking of *Don Carlo(s)*, which premiered in Vienna in 1932, with the local stage manager Lothar Wallerstein acting as Werfel's co-author. This translation was the least influential of Werfel's triad; though also appearing in print, it was apparently never performed outside Vienna (where it was produced anew in 1948), since the two translators' Jewish origins prevented any distribution in the Third Reich.

As opposed to *Forza* and *Carlos*, *Simon Boccanegra* was a true discovery of Werfel's as the work had, in the 20th century, not been staged anywhere outside Italy, where it was performed in 1909 in Palermo, in 1910 at La Scala and, with little resonance, in Naples in the 1929-30 season. It was precisely Werfel's translation that paved the way for the opera's international revival and, finally, its inclusion in today's standard operatic repertoire.

In his diary, in 1922, Werfel mentioned that he and Alma had played *Simone* and other forgotten Verdi operas on the piano, and that, together with her, he planned to translate and rework *Macbeth* [10, *678*]. In 1924, his intentions to revive *Boccanegra* and seven other Verdi operas were made public [11].

Even before the Dresden premiere of *Forza*, the plan to translate *Boccanegra* next must have become concrete; however, Werfel then postponed the project for a while in favour of a *Macbeth* translation [12] he never completed and which was finally assigned to the conductor Georg Göhler. In January 1927, a contract was drawn up between Werfel and Ricordi for the *Boccanegra* translation [6, *159*].

Although the avant-garde Darmstadt theatre, led by Carl Ebert, showed interest in hosting the premiere [4, *206-7*], Werfel and/or Ricordi, apparently preferring a more prestigious venue, chose the Städtische Oper Berlin, where the opening night was to take place by 31 December 1929. Owing to the crisis of the Prussian State Theatres – due to rising deficits, even the privatisation of the Städtische Oper was discussed and general manager Tietjen's post was at stake [13] – the production was delayed, and, despite Tietjen's protests, the Vienna State Opera made use of its contractual right to premiere the opus in the New Year [14].

The opening night in Vienna, where the work had first been performed in 1882-83 to lukewarm reactions, was, however, a tremendous success on 12 January 1930, with critics reporting the many curtain calls for music director Clemens Krauss, stage manager Wallerstein, Werfel and the singers – "*Verdi war am Erscheinen verhindert*" ("*Verdi was unable to attend*") [15]. The audience of the "Festvorstellung" ("festival performance") included leading Austrian politicians and high administrative officials ("*G. Mahler z. B. bedurfte solcher Mätzchen freilich nicht*." ["*G. Mahler, for instance, was in no need of such extravaganza*"] [16]), as well as "*the directors of opera houses from all parts of Europe*." [17]. Nevertheless, despite Werfel's

reworking of the libretto, some reviewers criticised the opera's plot as being complicated, childish and old-fashioned, one even calling the work a "*historisch-romantische[s] Kasperltheater*" ("*historic-romantic Punch-and-Judy show*") [18]. The belated Berlin premiere of 8 February repeated the musical success, but critical voices against the opera's *sujet* sounded much the same as in Vienna: "*... the libretto is beyond refurbishing. It is impossible fully to grasp, even read.*" [19]

Apart from using a few lines from Carl Niese's 1882 translation (e.g. "*Hier Gift und dort ein Dolchstoß*" [20; 21, *54*]), Werfel had completely reworked the libretto, translating freely and making use of his personal expressionist style, thus, e.g., rendering Amelia's aria a composed poem rather than a piece of operatic music [4, *218*]. By raising the libretto's literary quality, Werfel not only followed the rules set by Wagner's and Mahler's opera reforms, but tried to emulate the standard of the Hofmannsthal-Strauss collaboration. However, his interventions in the plot are of still higher interest, above all when viewed in their contemporary political context. The impending war between Genoa and Venice mentioned in the original is, in Werfel's version, omitted and the Genoese civil war, based on the conflict between the nobility and plebeians, highlighted instead: "*ei [Petrarca] per Venezia supplica pace*" [22, *31-2*] – "*Weinend beschwört der Eremit eure Seelen, Dem wüsten Bürgerkrieg zu entsagen*." ("*In tears, the eremite implores your souls to refrain from the horrors of civil war*.") [21, *58-9*]

Boccanegra's identity as a former corsair is turned into one of a mere plebeian (21, *9*), and social conflict is reinforced by the nobleman Fiesco calling him a slave rather than a corsair [22, *40*; 21, *49*]. Werfel emphasised Boccanegra's role as a democratically elected ruler and subsequently made him, upon his death from poison, in the finale hand the power back to the people instead of assigning it to the nobleman Gabriele Adorno [21, *84*]. The translation's political message was highlighted in the Berlin production, where red flags appeared on stage [23]. Furthermore, Werfel decidedly enhanced the pacifist aspect of the doge's character: "*Ich baue eine neue Welt, Ein Genua des Friedens. ... Ja, dies erhab'ne Friedenswerk Sei mein Vermächtnis im Tod!*" ("*I'm building a new world, a Genoa of peace. ... May this sublime work of peace be my legacy after death.*") [21, *68-9*] In act II, Boccanegra's "*All'armi!*" ("*To arms!*") [22, *55*] call is converted into "*Zum Frieden!*" ("*To peace!*") [21, *71*]

In the textual reworking of the central Council Chamber scene, containing Boccanegra's plea for peace, Werfel replaced Boito's original words "*E vo gridando: pace! E vo gridando: amor!*" (*"And I'm calling: peace! And I'm calling: love!"*) [22, *39*] with the philosophical credo *"Liebe ist Sinn der Welten, Der Mensch allein ist kalt*, [libretto] / *nur ihr allein sei[d] kalt* [vocal score], *Nur ihr seid starr und kalt!"* (*"Love's the meaning of the universe, only man is cold, only you are rigid and cold."*) [21, *48*; 24, *138-9*] – a formulation most likely inspired by the German Romantic poet Novalis's famous saying "*Die Liebe ist der Endzweck der Weltgeschichte, – das Amen des Universums*" (*"Love's the final goal of world history, the amen of the universe"*) [25]. A similar phrase can be found in Ugo Foscolo's *Jacopo Ortis*: *"Tutto è amore, diss'io; l'universo non è che amore..."* (*"All is love, I said; the universe is nothing but love..."*) [26]

Werfel was, in fact, a reader of Novalis, whom he expressly quoted in his 1931 speech *Realismus und Innerlichkeit* [9, *90*]. In view of the political situation in Europe

and, particularly, Germany and Austria around 1930, Werfel's translation of the Council Chamber scene can be considered a strong humanitarian statement. He himself later (allegedly) remembered *"wie unmittelbar die Friedensrede die Herzen der Zuhörer ergriff. In die von Parteienhaß wild zerklüftete Gegenwart strahlte von der Bühne herab die Idee des Friedens..."* (*"how the call for peace directly affected the audience's hearts. Into a reality which was monstrously shattered by the political parties' hatred, from the stage shone the idea of peace..."* [27]

The political implications of this scene became even more evident in a premiere of *Boccanegra* at the Städtische Oper Berlin in 1944 (presumably based on a translation other than Werfel's), when the doge's appeal for peace was followed by several minutes of applause and the baritone who sang Boccanegra was interrogated the same night by the Gestapo for attempted "subversion of the war effort" [28, *9*].

In view of the political ideas expressed in Werfel's translation, it comes as rather a surprise that, after the 1934 civil war in Austria, when the authoritarian government had used military force to suppress the uprising and subsequently executed several workers' leaders, he not only stayed in contact with the country's fascist elite, who were regular guests at Alma's parties [5, *247*-], but even befriended chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg [5, *276*-]. In 1937, he accepted the "Österreichisches Verdienstkreuz für Kunst und Wissenschaft Erster Klasse", a prestigious official medal [5, *286*].

During the 1930s, Werfel's *Boccanegra* was performed in about 35 theatres in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia, with a peak of 131 performances in the 1930-31 season, thus surpassing *Traviata* (127), but not *Carmen* (407) [29]. In 1939, a new translation by Carl Stueber, commissioned by Ricordi to replace the Werfel version, premiered on air at the Reichssender Leipzig, followed, in 1940 in Munich, by a translation by Hans Swarowsky.

As a result of the successful German revival of *Boccanegra*, the work was staged in Italy (La Scala 1933, Rome 1934, Florence 1938), Zagreb (1931), Buenos Aires (1935), Budapest (1937), and, perhaps most importantly, saw its American premiere in 1932 at the Met, whose manager Gatti-Casazza had revived other rare Verdi operas before, and where it has remained in the repertoire ever since [30]. Post-war productions included the belated British premieres at Sadler's Wells in 1948 and Covent Garden in 1965, as well as those in Rome (1952), Milan (1955), Naples (1958), Berlin and Vienna (1969), in addition to the Amsterdam (1961), Salzburg (1961), Dubrovnik (1969), Munich (1971) and Verona (1973) Festivals and the Italian RAI (1945, 1948, 1952) [31]. Owing to Werfel's German translation, the opus has found its way onto international stages and has formed part of the standard repertoire of major opera houses ever since WWII. Boccanegra's call for peace can be considered as relevant nowadays as it was in the 1930s.

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