

“Avenge me!”

Giuseppe Verdi, Salvadore Cammarano, and the Libretto for *Il Trovatore*

“The subject I would like, and which I propose, is *El Trovador*, a Spanish drama by Gutiérrez. To me it seems to me very beautiful, imaginative, and with powerful situations.”
(January 4, 1851)



Salvadore Cammarano

With this letter, Verdi began his fourth partnership with the Neapolitan librettist Salvadore Cammarano that would result in *Il Trovatore*. Two years later, the opera received its premiere to tumultuous success at the Teatro Apollo in Rome. Sadly, Cammarano did not live to see his work on the stage. Although the prehistory of *Il Trovatore* is seemingly well known, recent publications of the new critical edition of the full score and an edition of the correspondence between Verdi and Cammarano reveal some new and fascinating information on the opera’s creation.

Over the course of fifty years, sixteen librettists produced texts of varying quality for Verdi’s twenty-eight operas. Three librettists stood out: Francesco Maria Piave contributed ten librettos that included *Macbeth*, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, and *La Forza del Destino*. Salvadore Cammarano produced four: *Alzira*, *La Battaglia di Legnano*, *Luisa Miller*, and *Il Trovatore*. Arrigo Boito gently prodded Verdi out of his retirement after *Aida* and with his librettos for *Otello* and *Falstaff* enabled the “bronze colossus [to] ring” again,

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as he wrote to his friend Camille Bellaigue. Each earned a high level of trust from Verdi for their artistic judgment.

Few librettos are original creations, and most are adaptations of theater pieces. At Verdi’s suggestion, Piave took Victor Hugo’s *Le Roi s’amuse*—a daring choice, banned in 1832 after a single performance at the Comédie-Française in Paris—and transformed the play into what ultimately would become *Rigoletto*. Cammarano adapted Antonio García Gutiérrez’s *El Trovador*, which received its triumphant premiere in 1836 at Madrid’s Teatro del Príncipe, into *Il Trovatore*. Another successful play by Gutiérrez, *Simon Boccanegra* (1843), was transformed into a libretto by Piave as *Simon Boccanegra* and set by Verdi in 1857. Many writers, however, considered creating librettos to be devoid of literary merit, nothing more than made to order hackwork.

In contrast to his other librettists, Verdi had a far easier time with Cammarano in developing the libretto for *Il Trovatore*. Verdi respected Cammarano’s artistic judgment based on the librettist’s own experiences in the theater and working with other composers, including Gaetano Donizetti, Saviero Mercadante, and Giovanni Pacini. Many have criticized Cammarano’s treatment of the plot and the characters as “too dark, too sad” (as Verdi himself grumbled about the complainers) and completely incomprehensible. In the end, this is of little consequence. All that mattered to Verdi were the passions and human drama that propel the opera.

Cammarano’s gifts included a keen understanding of the the-



Dolora Zajick, a former Adler Fellow, performed the role of Azucena with the Company in 1986, 1994, and 2003 (pictured).

ater. Born in Naples on March 19, 1801 into a family of actors, writers, sculptors, painters, and a scenic artist at the Teatro San Carlo, Cammarano was introduced to the theater at an early age. In 1834, he joined the San Carlo as house librettist and achieved his first great success with the libretto for Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* the following year. He went on to produce over thirty-five librettos for more than twenty composers, six for Donizetti alone. In addition to writing and adapting librettos, Cammarano served as stage director at the San Carlo and created effective scenic tableaux for the soloists and the chorus.

Such experience served Cammarano well in his collaboration with Verdi. Although their first opera together, *Alzira* (Naples, 1845) was not a success, both scored a triumph with their second work, *La Battaglia di Legnano* (Rome, 1849). As a favor to Cammarano, Verdi agreed to compose *Luisa Miller* (based on Friedrich Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*) for the San Carlo. During the development of the libretto for *Luisa Miller*, Cammarano set down his artistic beliefs that guided him. "...to obtain the greatest possible perfection in an opera, one single mind should be author of both words and music: from this notion it follows that my view is that where two authors are involved they must at least identify with each other, and that even if the words should be with each other, and that even if the words should not be the servant of the music, they should not dominate it." Cammarano knew that Verdi appreciated his work, and he went on: "Convinced of this maxim, I have always worked in conformity with it, and the composers with whom I have shared my work were always consulted by me on the subject matter." *Luisa Miller* received its successful premiere on December 8, 1849.

Creating a libretto is difficult and challenging work, and *Il Trovatore* was no exception. A very brief overview of the tasks of the librettist of nineteenth-century Italian opera might be useful. Once a subject was decided, the librettist created (or adapted from an existing source) the plot of the story upon which the dramatic structure evolved. The actual text for the set pieces—recitatives, arias, duets, chorus numbers, and so on—were set in verse that followed a specific poetic meter with its number of syllables, rhythm, and the positioning of the final accent at the end of the line. Appropriate word choices were crucial, for their placement within the line governed the actual composition of the music. Each line of text may be between three (*ternario*) and eleven syllables (*endecasillabo*). Truncated verse (*verso tronco*) lets the final accent fall on the last syllable; in sliding verse (*verso sdrucciolo*) the accent falls on the antepenultimate syllable. A Verdian example of *quinario* (five syllables) with *verso sdrucciolo* is the Duke of Mantua's "La don-na è **mo** bi-le." Vowels as diphthongs or at the end of one word and at the beginning of the following word count as a single syllable (*elision*). Hence, "don-**na è**" is two syllables, not three. The first line of Manrico's great aria, "Di quella pira" is a demonstration of *quinario accoppiato* (two sets of five syllables adjoining one another at the center all in one line) with "Di quel-la pi-ra—l'or-ren-do fo-co." These two examples demonstrate the numerous possibilities available for Cammarano, a gifted librettist, to exploit the techniques of versification to its fullest.

It is one thing simply to write the text and another to set the music to that same text. The trick for the librettist is finding a balance that allows a genius like Verdi to "shape" the words to not

only fit the music but, even more importantly, to interact with one another. Demands for changes and cuts in the text for musical and dramatic reasons abound in Verdi's correspondence with his previous librettists; not so with Cammarano. In a letter to Cesare de Sanctis in Naples, Verdi explained that "the more Cammarano gives me novelty, freedom of form, the better I shall do.... Let him do what he wants: the bolder he is, the happier I'll be." (March 29, 1851)

Before actually writing the libretto, Cammarano exchanged draft copies of scenarios with Verdi that outlined with detail the opera's plot structure, dramaturgy, and character development for each act. Both possessed the instincts of the theater for what would and would not work on the stage. Verdi and Cammarano questioned, debated, and argued over the changes the required, although they did not always agree over the same topics under discussion. Gutiérrez's *El Trovador* was transformed from five acts into Cammarano's *Il Trovatore* in four acts. Social and political references were reduced to a minimum, and the plot centered instead on the actions of the individual characters. Themes of moral authority and fate found in *El Trovador* receded into the background.

The topics discussed included whether or not to emphasize Manrico as a lover or as a warrior (this point was never completely resolved); should Manrico be wounded in battle or in a duel (he would be wounded in battle, rather than a duel that would have lowered his social status); and if Leonora should have a cavatina (a short aria without recapitulation) in Act I or a "grand aria" in Act IV. After reading an early draft of Cammarano's scenario, Verdi commented, "Leonora does not take part in the song of the dead [*Miserere*] and the *Canzone* of the Troubadour, and yet this seems to me one of the best situations for an aria." (April 9, 1851) In the end, Leonora received both the cavatina in Act One, "Tacea la notte placida," and an aria in Act Four, "D'amor sull'ali rosee."

Perhaps the most interesting subject in the correspondence was Azucena. After reading Cammarano's first scenario, Verdi felt that Azucena did not "retain her strange and unusual character: it seems to me that the two great passions of this woman, filial love and maternal love, are no longer present with all their power." (April 9, 1851) The balance between love and the desire for vengeance appeared weakened; both themes needed reinforcement. Verdi insisted that the theme of Azucena's vengeance must run throughout the entire opera. Further, she should not be demented but "bowed down with fatigue, with grief, with terror, with keeping watch, she cannot carry on a connected conversation." When Manrico is executed, "her desire for vengeance becomes overpowering, and she says with exaltation... *yes, lights, lights, he is your brother... proud one!... you are avenged, oh mother!!*" (April 9, 1851) Cammarano responded strongly in a letter only recently published in full:

Azucena! Here is where we differ, but perhaps more in appearance than anything else. You say that Azucena is the contrast between filial love and maternal love, of affection for Manrico and a fierce thirst for vengeance: and yet I have read and reread her scenes [in the original play and] do not find a single syllable that refers to that.... My Azucena still harbors thoughts of vengeance.... You lament mightily that



Luciano Pavarotti and Joan Sutherland made their role debuts as Manrico and Leonora in San Francisco Opera's 1975 production.

the character of Azucena no longer has the force and originality it had before, and that she is demented in the final scene. As for her force, I have shown you that in my scenario her desire for vengeance shines forth, giving strength to her character....

Cammarano addressed Verdi's concerns about the verisimilitude of Azucena's state of mind:

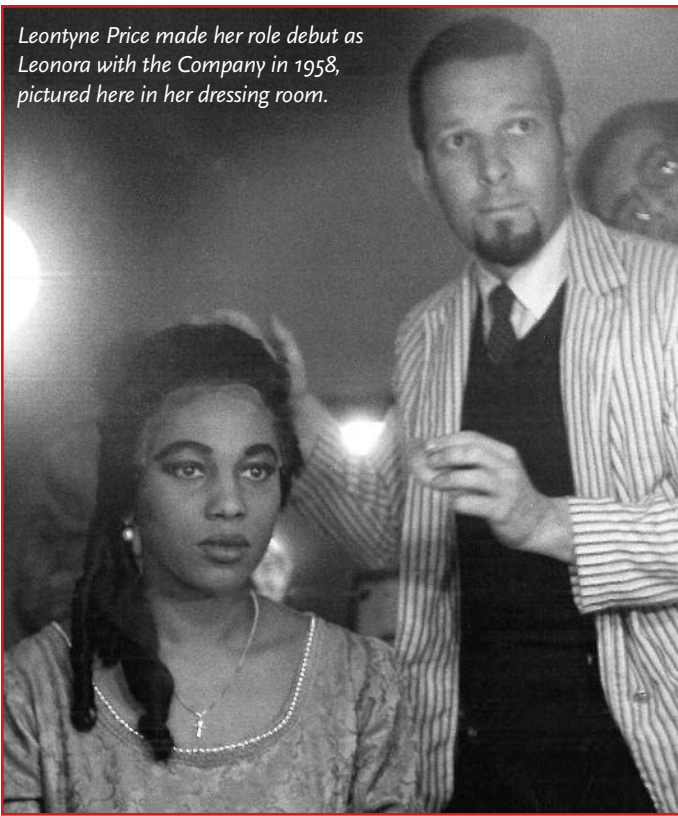
You don't want her demented in the final scene?... The less clearly Azucena reasons, the more rational the drama seems. I do not intend, by the way, that Azucena be insane at all times; her mind wanders when she recalls the horrendous catastrophes endured by her mother and her son. (April 26, 1851)

Azucena herself in Act II relates the events leading to her mother burning at the stake. In that story, her mother cries out "avenge me!" ("mi vendica!"); these two words provide the driving force for Azucena's passion for revenge.

In any development of a libretto, much text is added and deleted. What was left out of *Il Trovatore* is of great interest. Verdi proposed that in Act III, Manrico recount a dream to Leonora. The idea is taken directly from the play, but Cammarano never versified the text.

I witnessed a specter that on the opposite shore
Wandered like a ghostly illusion
With mysterious steps;

Leontyne Price made her role debut as Leonora with the Company in 1958, pictured here in her dressing room.



And a doleful moan was let loose
 Interrupting the nocturnal silence,
 Now looking sadly at us,
 Now smiling with an infernal face.
 Suddenly the hurricane shakes and quivers
 With hundreds of thunder-bolts,
 And a thousand rays crossed,
 And the ground and the mountains trembled
 At its terrifying imprint.
 And, enveloped in smoke, the fierce phantasma fled,
 extending its arms to me.
 "Avenge me!" it said, and it threw itself to the clouds;
 "Avenge me!" repeating through the air.

Cammarano argued against including these verses; he believed this scene to be superfluous and repeated much of Azucena's Act Two narrative following "Stride la vampa." His theatrical instincts proved him right: While the dream sequence might have given Manrico's character greater depth, it held up the dramatic flow and would have stopped the opera in its tracks. Verdi reluctantly acquiesced to Cammarano's judgment. Originally, the act closed with a duet but Cammarano suggested another aria, one that would become Manrico's thrilling "Di quella pira."

In mid-July, Verdi received the remainder of the libretto. He was satisfied with the results and wrote to Cammarano, "With increasing pleasure I read and reread your verses, so full of originality, of life, of passion. Courage, my dear Cammarano—We must do *King Lear*, which will be our masterpiece." Sadly, Verdi's letter arrived after Cammarano's death on July 17, 1852, eight days after he finished the text for "Di quella pira." One can only speculate how Cammarano and Verdi might have brought to life Shakespeare's magnificent *King Lear*.

Although the libretto was completed, Verdi still needed some-

one to adjust and polish the final text. During Cammarano's last illness, Leone Emanuele Bardare assisted with transcribing and copying the text. After Cammarano's death, Bardare assisted Verdi in carrying out the necessary changes. These included a refinement of Azucena's "Stride la vampa" to fit a poetic meter more suitable for a musical setting. The second and more drastic change occurred when Verdi deleted Cammarano's suggested text for the finale of the opera. Here, the choice of words proved crucial. After Manrico's execution, Azucena cries out, "A tard vendetta, ma quanto fiera avesti, o madre!" ("A late vengeance you have had, oh mother, but how fierce!"). In its place, Verdi inserted "Sei vendicata o madre!" ("You are avenged, oh mother!"), thus hammering home the theme of vengeance—a far more pungent and theatrical curtain closer.

Verdi completed *Il Trovatore* in mid-December 1852 and traveled to Rome at the beginning of January to supervise the rehearsals at the Teatro Apollo. Little documentation of the rehearsals survives, other than Verdi's grumblings about the behavior of singers for Leonora and Azucena. The premiere followed on January 19, 1853 to enormous success, and newspapers reported on the audience reactions: "[The audience] rushed to the exit of the theater where, with many candles and the sound of a brass band, they greeted the celebrated composer. Having reached his residence... other festive candles awaited him, and more cheering, which obliged him to present himself... from his balcony." Verdi agreed to delay his departure from Rome and attend the fourth performance, where "the audience showed how much it had appreciated the great composer's reciprocal gesture of affection with applause, cheering, flowers, and by waving white banners, etc., in a way that would move even the most calloused [observer] to tears."

Scholars and musicologists may criticize the dramaturgy and the structure of the libretto or quibble over the choice of words as being old-fashioned. In the end, such judgments are irrelevant. As in his previous operas, Verdi emphasized the human drama and the passions of love, hate, jealousy, and revenge. He was proud of his music and Cammarano's libretto, and he was especially fond of the part of Azucena. Shortly after the premiere, Verdi replied to a request from a singer for changes to Leonora's aria. The composer responded to his long time librettist, Francesco Maria Piave:

Greet Barbieri and tell her that the cavatina of *Il Trovatore* seems good to me, and therefore I cannot and must not change it. It would be suicide! If I am permitted to voice my opinion, why is Barbieri taking that part if it does not suit her? If she still wants to do *Il Trovatore* there is another part, that of the Gypsy woman. Away with conventions, and let no one say that it is a secondary role: truly not: it is a principal part, the most principal; more beautiful, more dramatic, more original than the other. If I were a prima donna (a fine thing!) in *Il Trovatore* I would always play the part of the Gypsy. (April 17, 1853)

Verdi's instincts from the beginning were solid, and he always pointed to the final arbiter: the accolades of the public and its subsequent effect on the box office that has remained unchanged since 1853. 🌸