

Synopsis

Genoa, 14th century

Prologue

A square outside the church of San Lorenzo and the Fieschi palace

Act I

SCENE 1 In the seaside garden of the Grimaldi palace

SCENE 2 The council chamber of the doge's palace

Act II

The doge's palace

Act III

The council chamber of the doge's palace

Prologue

Genoa, 14th century. Paolo and Pietro, leaders of the plebeians, are conspiring to overthrow the aristocracy. They name the popular former pirate Simon Boccanegra as their candidate for the office of doge, the chief magistrate of the republic. Boccanegra accepts, hoping that his new position will enable him to marry Maria, the daughter of the patrician Fiesco, who keeps her prisoner because she bore Boccanegra an illegitimate child. Fiesco appears alone, mourning Maria's sudden death. Unaware she has died, Boccanegra tries to make peace with the patrician, but Fiesco demands that he first be given his granddaughter. Boccanegra explains that the little girl has mysteriously disappeared from her hiding place, and Fiesco declares that there can thus be no peace. The two men part and Boccanegra enters the Fiesco palace in search of Maria. Just as he discovers her body, the crowd proclaims him doge.

Act I

Twenty-five years have passed. Boccanegra has exiled many of his political opponents and Fiesco lives outside Genoa under the assumed name of Andrea Grimaldi. He is the guardian of a certain Amelia Grimaldi. Abandoned as an orphan, she was taken in by the Grimaldis to be brought up in place of the real Grimaldi daughter, who died at a young age, in order to provide the family with an heiress. Amelia is in reality Maria Boccanegra, the doge's daughter and Fiesco's granddaughter, but neither man knows her true identity. Amelia's lover is the patrician Gabriele Adorno. Together with Fiesco, whom he knows only under his assumed name, Gabriele has been plotting against Boccanegra.

SCENE 1 In the garden of the Grimaldi palace, Amelia waits for Gabriele. She warns him against the dangers of his political activities and tells him that the doge wants her to marry his courtier Paolo. Gabriele hopes to marry Amelia himself and is undeterred when she reveals that she is not a Grimaldi but an orphan of unknown background. He leaves, determined to overthrow the doge. Boccanegra arrives to tell Amelia he has pardoned her brothers, who had been exiled. Impressed by his generosity, she admits her love for Gabriele and talks about her lonely past. From the matching portraits they have of her mother, Boccanegra realizes that Amelia is his long-lost daughter. They embrace. The girl leaves, and Boccanegra tells Paolo to abandon any hope of marrying her. Paolo plots with Pietro to kidnap Amelia.

SCENE 2 Boccanegra urges the city council to preserve peace with Venice. Gabriele runs in, chased by a mob: He has killed a man who was attempting to abduct Amelia. He accuses Boccanegra of plotting the abduction and tries to stab him. Amelia intervenes. She describes her abduction and escape, but refuses to reveal who was responsible. A new argument erupts and Boccanegra again urges peace. He curses Amelia's kidnapers and commands Paolo, whom he suspects to be the culprit, to repeat his words. The terrified Paolo is forced to obey, even though he is cursing himself.

Act II

Paolo reflects on the curse and pours poison into Boccanegra's drinking water. Fiesco and Gabriele are led in, and Paolo tries to convince the old man to assassinate the doge, but in spite of his hatred for Boccanegra, Fiesco refuses to be involved in the plot. When Paolo makes insinuations about Boccanegra's relationship with Amelia, Gabriele, left alone, breaks into a fit of jealousy. Amelia enters, but before she can explain, Boccanegra appears. Gabriele hides while Amelia asks her father to pardon her lover. Boccanegra agrees. Alone, he drinks the poisoned water and falls asleep. Gabriele, who has heard nothing of the preceding conversation, returns and is about to stab Boccanegra when Amelia rushes in. The doge reveals that he is Amelia's father and forgives the repentant Gabriele. As a rebellious mob is heard from outside, Gabriele vows to fight at Boccanegra's side.

Act III

Genoa is celebrating Boccanegra's victory over the rebels. Paolo, who is being led to his execution, encounters Fiesco and confesses to him that it was he who poisoned the doge and tried to kidnap Amelia. Boccanegra enters, mortally ill, thinking about his beloved Genoese sea. Fiesco challenges him and reveals his true identity. When Boccanegra tells him that Amelia is his granddaughter, Fiesco breaks into tears and the two men are reconciled. Amelia and Gabriele enter. The dying Boccanegra blesses the young couple and names Gabriele his successor.

Giuseppe Verdi

Simon Boccanegra

Premiere: Teatro la Fenice, Venice, 1857 (original version);

Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 1881 (revised version)

Simon Boccanegra is Verdi's compelling portrayal of a man who is both a leader and an outsider, set against one of the most incisive depictions of politics ever put on the stage. The title character, with his complex relationships with rivals and his long-lost daughter, is one of the summits of the baritone repertoire. *Boccanegra* was unsuccessful at its 1857 premiere, but more than 20 years later, Verdi's publisher persuaded him to revise the work in collaboration with librettist Arrigo Boito, a younger and controversial musician/poet. Boito made the story more compact and added the thrilling council chamber scene at the end of Act I. This revision was successful, but the opera still remains just outside the core repertoire of Verdi favorites. The complicated story and dark tone have proven to be stumbling blocks for many critics and audiences in America. Yet it remains a rewarding example of Verdi's genius at its most humane and insightful.

The Creators

In a remarkable career spanning six decades in the theater, Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) composed 28 operas, at least half of which are at the core of today's repertoire. His role in Italy's cultural and political development has made him an icon in his native country. This opera was based on the play *Simón Bocanegra* (1843) by the Spanish playwright Antonio García Gutiérrez (1813–1884), whose *El Trovador* was the source for Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. The Romantic authors took special pleasure in trashing classical notions of ideal dramatic form with their display of intense emotions, outlandish coincidences, and unconventional uses of narrative time—all of which are present in *Simon Boccanegra*. Francesco Maria Piave (1810–1876) was Verdi's librettist during his extremely successful and productive middle period and worked with him on *Ernani*, *Macbeth*, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, and *La Forza del Destino*, among others. Arrigo Boito (1842–1918) was a composer, author, and (eventually) leading Italian literary figure. His work on the revision of *Boccanegra* was his first operatic collaboration with Verdi, a partnership that would culminate in the composer's final two masterpieces, *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

The Setting

The opera is based on a historical figure who, in 1339, became doge (leader) of the Republic of Genoa. While the details of the pseudo-history in the story are irrelevant to appreciating the opera, the issues symbolized in the historical moment are crucial. The endless fighting among and within the various Italian city-states of the era forms a rich background for this tale of a man worn down

by social and personal fragmentation. Amid this turmoil, the humanist poet Petrarch (1304–1374) wrote letters to various leaders urging peace and the development of an Italian national identity. One of his letters is referred to in the opera's council chamber scene. His great poem "Italia mia," a masterpiece uniting political and erotic imagery, climaxes with the thunderous line "I'vo gridando pace" (loosely, "I keep crying for peace") and forms the central theme of the scene's magnificent ensemble. The personal experience of shattered love becomes an eloquent political manifesto in both Petrarch and *Boccanegra*.

The Music

Even looking at its original 1857 form, Verdi was attempting something new with *Boccanegra*. He supplied each act with the customary rousing music, but insisted that the important parts of the score were found between the applause-grabbing moments. His sophisticated revision expanded the role of the orchestra and deepened the characterizations. Standouts in the score include the aria "Il lacerato spirito" in the Prologue for the grief-struck Fiesco, who is mourning the death of his daughter, Maria. The aria is punctuated by thumps from brass and percussion and tells us early on that much of the opera's emotion will be

"internalized" instead of shouted from the rooftops. The orchestra also sets up the beautiful encounter between father and daughter in Act I, Scene 1, and indicates Amelia's murky origins as the illegitimate daughter of a pirate while lightening the tone from the gloomy prologue. The choruses are as skillfully crafted as any Verdi ever wrote. The council chamber scene includes one of the most elaborate ensembles in opera and ends with a whisper instead of the usual wall of sound.

Met History

The Met gave the American premiere of *Simon Boccanegra* in 1932 with Lawrence Tibbett, Maria Müller, Giovanni Martinelli, and Ezio Pinza, conducted by Tullio Serafin. The opera opened the 1939–40 season with the same male leads, Elisabeth Rethberg as Amelia, and Leonard Warren in the secondary baritone role. In 1949, Warren was promoted to the title role opposite Astrid Varnay and Richard Tucker, and just over 10 years later, Warren and Tucker headed the cast of a new production by the celebrated director Margaret Webster. Renata Tebaldi and Zinka Milanov appeared as Amelia in this staging over the following seasons. The 1968 revival included the impressive men's line-up of Cornell MacNeil, Sherrill Milnes, and Nicolai Ghiaurov, and in 1984, Milnes moved into the title role in a new production led by James Levine that featured the Met debut of Aprile Mollo. Levine conducted the 1995 premiere of the current production with Vladimir Chernov, Kiri Te Kanawa, and Plácido Domingo (as Gabriele Adorno) heading the cast. In the 2010 revival, Domingo took on the baritone title role for the first time at the Met.

Program Note

Why was Giuseppe Verdi drawn to the play *Simón Bocanegra*? For one thing, the play's author was the Spanish dramatist Antonio García Gutiérrez, whose *El Trovador* had already provided Verdi with the subject for *Il Trovatore*. The enormous and immediate success of *Trovatore* must have been a factor; during Verdi's lifetime it was by far the most frequently performed of all his lyric dramas. Another influence may have been Verdi's love for the seaside and specifically for Genoa, principal city of the Italian Riviera and the location of the drama. Ten years after he wrote the original version of *Simon Boccanegra* (first performed in Venice in 1857), Verdi began to spend his winters in Genoa, and did so until the end of his life more than 30 years later. It is also of interest that, after he had already written the play *Simón Bocanegra*, García Gutiérrez became Spanish consul in Genoa. Poet and composer were born the same year (1813), and the playwright's name appears in Verdi's correspondence; they may have known each other.

Certainly Verdi's political orientation played a role in his decision to set the Spanish play. He admired Giuseppe Mazzini, Giuseppe Garibaldi, and George Washington, and he once described himself as liberal. During the American Civil War, for example, the composer corresponded with his former student and close friend Emanuele Muzio, who was conducting in the United States at the time. The letters show that Verdi opposed slavery.

In this regard, we may note that the historical Simon Boccanegra became the first elected doge of Genoa in 1339, representing the plebeians, the popular party, as opposed to the nobility, the aristocratic party of established wealth and power. It is also useful to bear in mind that during the Crusades to the Holy Land (11th to 13th centuries), Genoa developed its economic and political strength to become one of the most powerful states in the Mediterranean region. There were Genoese colonies from Spain to the Crimea, with settlements in North Africa and on many of the islands between Europe and Africa. Dependent on excellent, adventurous seamen, it is no coincidence that the city of Genoa gave birth to Christopher Columbus.

Another possible reason for Verdi's interest in the play was more personal. Most of the composer's dramas have tragic endings. *Simon Boccanegra* also has a tragic beginning. During the prologue, Boccanegra is approached to run for the highest office in Genoa by two leaders of the plebeian party, Paolo and Pietro—rather inappropriate names for politicians who, in their own words, are after gold and power. A heroic sea captain and not a politician, Boccanegra allows himself to be nominated only because he hopes the high position will persuade the aristocratic Fieschi family that, despite his humble origins, he is worthy of marrying their daughter Maria. She has already borne Boccanegra's daughter, also named Maria, and is being held captive in the family palace. Early in the opera, Boccanegra is confronted by Maria's father, Fiesco, in a duet that serves as the dramatic and musical climax of the prologue. Boccanegra doesn't know that Maria has died, but the audience knows; just before the

duet it has heard Fiesco's lament, "Il lacerato spirito," sung while an offstage chorus intones the Miserere, a chant associated with death. This aria, with its stunning orchestral postlude, is the best-known selection from the opera and recalls the Miserere in Act IV of *Il Trovatore*, musically the most impressive scene in that opera.

In the duet, Boccanegra begs Fiesco for forgiveness, which the older man agrees to give if Boccanegra will give him the "innocent unfortunate born of impure love." But Boccanegra explains that the "enemy of pity, fate, has stolen her." The child was left with an old nurse who died, and the little girl wandered off. Try as he might, Boccanegra could not find her. In that case, Fiesco remarks,

"there can be no peace" between them. Boccanegra then enters the Fieschi palace seeking Maria, only to find her corpse. Heartbroken, he rushes into the street to hear Paolo and Pietro sing, "Boccanegra, the people acclaim you doge," followed by the chorus shouting, "Viva Simon, elected by the people."

Public success, but private disaster: There is a parallel with Verdi's own life. The young Boccanegra's loss of his beloved Maria and their child closely resembles the young Verdi's loss of his first wife and both their children. All three died within a period of 22 months when Verdi was beginning his career as an opera composer. Verdi once confessed that he cried for his operatic characters; how he must have empathized with Boccanegra!

Twenty-five years intervene between the prologue and the rest of the opera. Boccanegra has been a successful doge. The climax of the first part of Act I is the beautiful recognition duet between Boccanegra and his daughter. She had been taken to a home for orphans after her nurse's death and then adopted as a substitute for the deceased Amelia Grimaldi in order to save the Grimaldi fortune from confiscation. The unscrupulous Paolo wants to marry her, as much for her money as for her beauty; but the doge, learning that his daughter loves another, refuses him. The infuriated Paolo now turns against Boccanegra, has Amelia kidnapped, and in Act II poisons Boccanegra to bring about the opera's final tragedy.

Simon Boccanegra was not successful at its premiere in Venice in 1857. In response, the composer made minor changes and directed the opera both at Reggio Emilia (1857) and Naples (1858). These stagings had some success, but there were also box office disasters in Florence and Milan, and the opera dropped from the repertoire. Verdi, however, never gave up easily. He was convinced he had achieved something valuable, even special, in *Simon Boccanegra*. And when Arrigo Boito wanted to write a libretto for the composer based on Shakespeare's *Othello*, the composer consented to work with Boito on *Othello* only if the poet agreed to revise the libretto of *Simon Boccanegra* for him. In addition to writing completely new and more effective music to begin the prologue and Act III, the composer demanded from the reluctant Boito a considerable amount of new text, for a dignified and effective Act I benediction by Fiesco on the forthcoming marriage of Amelia/Maria and Gabriele, for

example. Most importantly, Verdi aimed for clearer musical and dramatic pictures of the hero and the villain, Boccanegra and Paolo. He succeeded in making the latter a villain comparable to Iago by completely rewriting Paolo's monologue opening Act II, as well as much of his other music.

Boccanegra, whose heroism and resourcefulness is largely taken for granted in the first version of the opera, has a magnificent role to play in a new finale to Act I, the council chamber scene of the revised 1881 Milan version. Here, in addition to making a plea for peace between Venice and Genoa, the major Italian city-states of the 14th century—and this resonated powerfully in the newly-unified Italy—Boccanegra is shown acting decisively to quell an incipient rebellion. He then forces Paolo to curse himself for the dastardly deed of having Amelia kidnapped. Numerous other musical changes, especially in the enrichment of the orchestration, made *Simon Boccanegra* the most thoroughly revised of Verdi's many reworked operas.

Beyond the personal aspects relating specifically to *Simon Boccanegra* mentioned earlier, we should not forget that Verdi looked for a number of dramatic elements in each of the operatic subjects he set. There had to be strong, well-motivated conflicts between the principal characters, such as those between Boccanegra and Fiesco and, later, between Boccanegra and Paolo. The composer always sought sympathetic, or at least believable, figures such as Boccanegra himself, his daughter, her fiancé Gabriele, and the highly principled, if obstinate, Fiesco (Andrea in much of the opera). Verdi also demanded powerful, striking situations in his dramas, such as Boccanegra's discovery of Maria's death at the precise moment he learns that he has been elected doge.

The plot of *Simon Boccanegra* is more complex than that of *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *Aida*, or *Otello*, but no more so than *Il Trovatore*. As in the earlier work, Verdi was inspired to write glorious music, especially for the revised version that had its premiere on March 24, 1881, at La Scala 24 years after the world premiere of the work on March 12, 1857. It is the revised version that has become standard throughout the world and is being performed at the Met this season.

—Martin Chusid