

Seattle Opera: *Otello* intermission 20-min talk

Naomi André

[Introduction and listening to historical recordings]

Hello Seattle—I'm so happy to be joining you (over the airwaves) and to feel connected during this crazy pandemic. I'm very excited to be talking about this historical recording broadcast of Verdi's *Otello* from 1967.

Radio broadcasts are an important part of our history here in the US as a way of getting to know opera. Sadly, we do not have opera companies scattered across every town and city, where we can all easily pop out to the opera whenever we want. So, we end up getting to know a lot about operas through recordings. A special feature of listening to a live performance is that though you might not have the pristine version of a studio recording, you get to feel the excitement of being there. You hear the spatial placement of who is upstage, who is down stage, and sometimes some thumps and other bumps in the staging (e.g., if something falls or someone stomps away).

Opera broadcasts are marvelous gifts. We can listen to them at home, in the car, or wherever we might be. Even in a pandemic, such experiences continue to bring us together.

Today we live in an era of the internet, DVDs, and streaming content on demand, so we definitely gain a lot by hearing AND seeing opera at our convenience whenever we want. But it's a little different than listening together. I want to think about that as we're in the midst of this 1967 Seattle Opera production. We are listening to a live performance—in a way, we are kind of eavesdropping in on something that had a first audience that experienced it in person.

Rather than start with the 1967 Seattle Opera production that we are hearing right now, I want to go back a little and think about the first performance of Verdi's *Otello* at La Scala in Milan and then think more broadly later on about how this recording has many meanings when we think about it when it was performed in 1967 and our listening to it today—at this moment in time, in 2020.

[*Otello* 1887]

Verdi was late in his career at the point when *Otello* premiered in 1887.

Before *Otello*, his last opera had been *Aida* (in 1871) commissioned by the Khedive Ismail of Egypt. A few years later, Verdi wrote the *Requiem* in memory of Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873). Besides overseeing a few productions of his other operas, in the 1880s Verdi was primarily living a

nice life as a retired gentleman farmer in his lovely villa, St. Agata. He bought that property in 1848 and built St. Agata in Busseto, near Parma in the Emilia-Romagna region of Northern Italy.

One of the projects Verdi was working on at this later point in his life was a revision of *Simon Boccanegra*, a middle period opera that had fallen out of favor. Giulio Ricordi (Verdi's publisher) had Arrigo Boito (a young writer and composer) work on the libretto of *Boccanegra* with Verdi. This collaboration between Verdi and Boito went well, and set up one of the most important composer-librettist collaborations in opera history (on the level of Mozart and Da Ponte, and Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hoffmannsthal). Together Verdi and Boito completed *Otello* in 1887 and later *Falstaff* in 1893, both premiered at La Scala in Milan.

Francesco Tamagno (born in Torino, Italy in 1850 and died in 1905) not only created the title role in Verdi's *Otello*, he was also the first Gabriele Adorno in Verdi and Boito's revised *Simon Boccanegra* (from 1881). Tamagno became one of Verdi's favorite tenors. He excelled in roles requiring a very high top, and also the ability to soar over increasingly larger orchestras. You can get a sense of his bright, powerful sound and amazing high notes from this recording of him singing "Di quella pira" from *Il Trovatore*.

[pause]

For the treacherously difficult role of Verdi's Otello, a tenor needs to sing very high, yet sustain a lot of power throughout the range. The opera opens with a storm and the drama of Otello's soldiers returning from having defeated the Turkish. Within the first few moments of his stepping on stage, in Otello's opening "Esultate!" that pronounces victory, the vocal line shoots up to top of the staff and hangs out there in an exposed way, touching on a high B just in his entrance. Later in the act, he again assumes the commanding role of the leader when he quells a developing fight among his men (when Iago has baited Cassio in the *Brindisi* drinking song). By the end of the act, Otello shows himself as a loving husband in the beautiful duet with Desdemona. The repeated text of "un bacio" (a kiss) is also high in his range, yet this time, not at all forceful; instead, it is lyrical and very tender.

The voice of Otello is a mature hero and a little heavier than the typical lyric tenor hero Verdi had written earlier in his career. This adds drama to the vocal characterization of the leading roles. In an earlier Verdi opera, Cassio would be the typical Verdian heroic tenor; hence, vocally he

seems to have a great musical connection with Desdemona's soprano. One way that Verdi marks Otello's difference is through a slightly heavier heroic voice.

Another way Verdi marks Otello is from Shakespeare's characterization of him as a Moor—a somewhat ambiguous designation that indicates a darker race that could come from Africa, the Middle East, or India. Boito and Verdi place the entire opera in Cyprus, and leave out the first act of Shakespeare's play that took place in Venice. A provocative effect of this is that the black-white racialized language that is heaviest in the first Act of Shakespeare's play, is not there in the same way in the opera. Instead, the full opera takes place in a rather “exoticized” location—Cyprus—not Venice which is part of Europe. In the opera, the so-called “Venetian act” is Act 3 when the Venetian delegation comes to Cyprus (from Venice); hence, they are not at home given the hegemonic political and cultural advantage. Instead, setting the opera in Cyprus allows the story to take place in an in-between racialized exotic zone; an island in the Mediterranean that is between the Middle East and Europe.

[Appearance and resonance of Otello in different times]

From pictures of Francesco Tomagno in the first performance of Otello, we see his skin darkened to take the part of the Moor, and an afro-like wig on his head. The practice of “blacking” up characters in opera (such as the Ethiopian characters in *Aida*—Aida and her father Amonasro and this title role in *Otello*) is part of the history of the first performance practice of these operas for their time and has continued up through the present. [On a related note, the practice of “yellowface” for Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot* are also in this same ideology.] It is an important thing that this is being questioned and queried today. In 2015, the Metropolitan Opera brought attention to this by saying it was not going to “blacken up” Latvian tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko who was singing the title role in *Otello* to open the season. Though this was a bold and, to most people, a necessary move in 2015; there is no ongoing commitment regarding Blackface (or Yellowface) by the Metropolitan Opera or most opera companies, up through today.

My bigger point now, is to think about this performance of James McCracken singing the role of Otello in 1967. McCracken's face was very likely darkened with makeup when he sang the role of Otello in Seattle in 1967. As was just mentioned, this was the standard procedure at that time in all opera houses, and in many places this still continues (though it is not the practice today at the Seattle Opera and a few other houses). The issue of Blackface is a painful one today due to the history of minstrelsy it references from the past. Minstrelsy was developed in the United States

during the antebellum period, in the 1820s. This legacy of having non-Black people using makeup to darken the skin on their face, neck, and arms and to use bright red paint to emphasize the ungainliness of the mouth, propagated negative stereotypes. These portrayals included the lazy irresponsible plantation slave, the sexually available Jezebel, and the violent hypersexualized Buck character. Not just an American phenomenon, traveling minstrel troupes performed across Europe and onto the African continent. Using Blackface makeup today, recalls this legacy of domination and control. Combined, the practice of Blackface and Yellowface make-up reinforces an assumed ideology of colonial power and dehumanizing people from different racial and ethnic identities.

McCracken and Robert Nagy divided the five performances in September of 1967. This is a critical time in the midst of the Civil Rights movement. By 1967 it has been over 10 years since Emmett Till was murdered (in 1955), Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus that led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott (also in 1955), and the Little Rock Nine in Arkansas required federal troops to escort them to uphold integrated schools (in 1957). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 (preventing employment discrimination), and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (preventing literacy tests and other barriers to voting) had already been passed. Malcom X was assassinated in 1965 and Martin Luther King, Jr. would be gunned down a few months after this performance, in April of 1968. Rebellions and riots were breaking out all over the country with Watts in Los Angeles in August 1965 and Detroit, in July of 1967, along with many others. This difficult and painful history continues and in the thick of it is this historical performance of Verdi's *Otello*.

A particularly telling moment in this history is the Supreme Court case of *Loving vs. State of Virginia* heard in April, and its decision was handed down on June 12, 1967. This case ruled that anti-miscegenation laws, laws banning interracial marriage, violate the Equal Protection and Due Process clauses of the 14th Amendment in the US Constitution. The shock of *Otello* and Desdemona's relationship in the opera was a recent issue in the news—albeit indirectly—as the pushback to interracial relationships, and black-white marriages, was very real. Such mixed-race marriages were just newly legal in all 50 states at the time of this original broadcast.

Today in October 2020, the image of Black and white interracial relationships is generally considered less controversial. Yet still, we are listening to this recording of *Otello* in momentous times. The summer of 1967 is referred to as the “long hot summer of 1967” where there were 159 race riots that erupted across the United States. In response, President Lyndon B. Johnson constituted the Kerner Commission to explore the roots of the violence. The summer of 2020 is

going to go down in history for many things—the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic and our fear of this deadly virus. The continuation of police violence with the names of Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Jacob Blake, and so many other unarmed Black people who were shot, suffocated, and put in lethal chokeholds. We also see a rise of awareness with peaceful demonstrations and the interracial coming together of honoring Black lives and racial justice.

I return to a question I mentioned earlier. What does it mean to listen in on the past through an historical recording? When we think about the larger historical contexts, what do we hear and see from 1887 and 80 years later in 1967? Now we are a little over 50 years after this recording was made. It feels like there are a lot of things we can still see through listening in on these tumultuous times.