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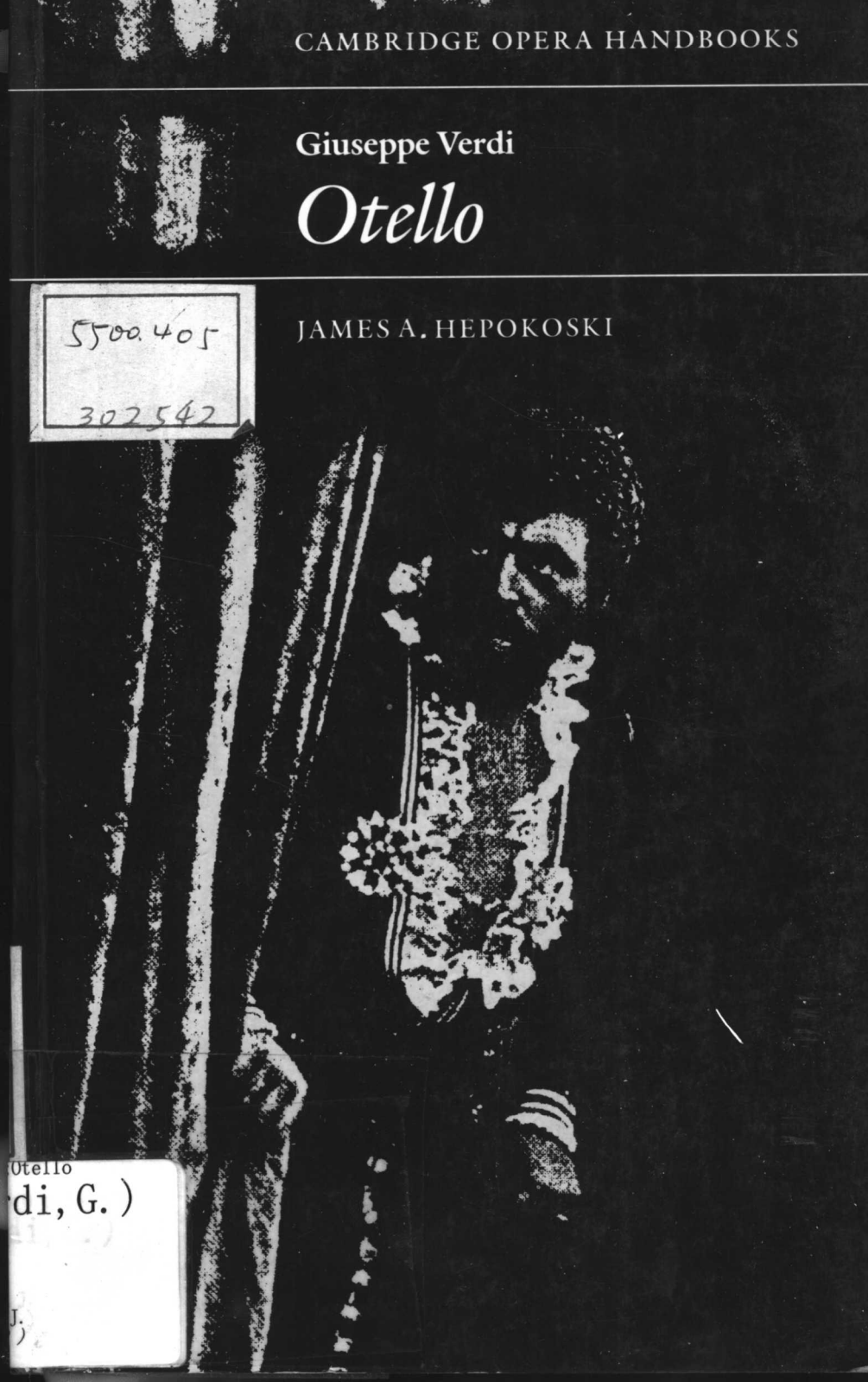
JAMES A. HEPOKOSKI

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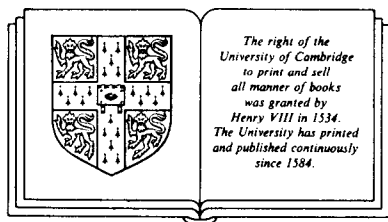
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Giuseppe Verdi *Otello*

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*For my father and mother,
Arthur and Helen Hepokoski*

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List of abbreviations within the text

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Longer citation</i> (see the Bibliography for the full citation)
Ab.	Abbiati, <i>Giuseppe Verdi</i> , 1959
Alb.	Alberti, <i>Verdi intimo</i> , 1931
Budden	Budden, <i>The Operas of Verdi</i> 3, 1981
Cop.	Cesare and Luzio, <i>I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi</i> , 1913
CV	Luzio, <i>Carteggi verdiani</i> , 1935–47
CVB	<i>Carteggio Verdi–Boito</i> , 1978
DS	Ricordi, <i>Disposizione scenica per l'opera Otello</i> , 1887
OG	<i>Otello . . . Giudizi della stampa</i> , 1887
VR	Cella and Petrobelli, <i>Giuseppe Verdi–Giulio Ricordi: Corrispondenza e immagini 1881/1890</i> , 1982

'Unpublished; Parma' refers to previously unpublished correspondence whose original is located in the Biblioteca Palatina, Parma.

'Unpublished; Ricordi Arch.' refers to previously unpublished correspondence whose original is located in the Archivio Storico of G. Ricordi & C., Milan.

All musical citations from *Otello*, unless otherwise specified, refer to the currently available vocal score published by G. Ricordi & C., Milan (plate number 52105, ed. Mario Parenti, 1964). Citations refer to page number / system number / bar number: thus 181/4/1–2 refers to the Ricordi vocal score, page 181, system 4, bars 1–2.

All textual citations from *Othello* refer to the edition of the play published in *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, ed. Norman Sanders (Cambridge, 1984).

Otello refers to the opera; *Othello* to the play.

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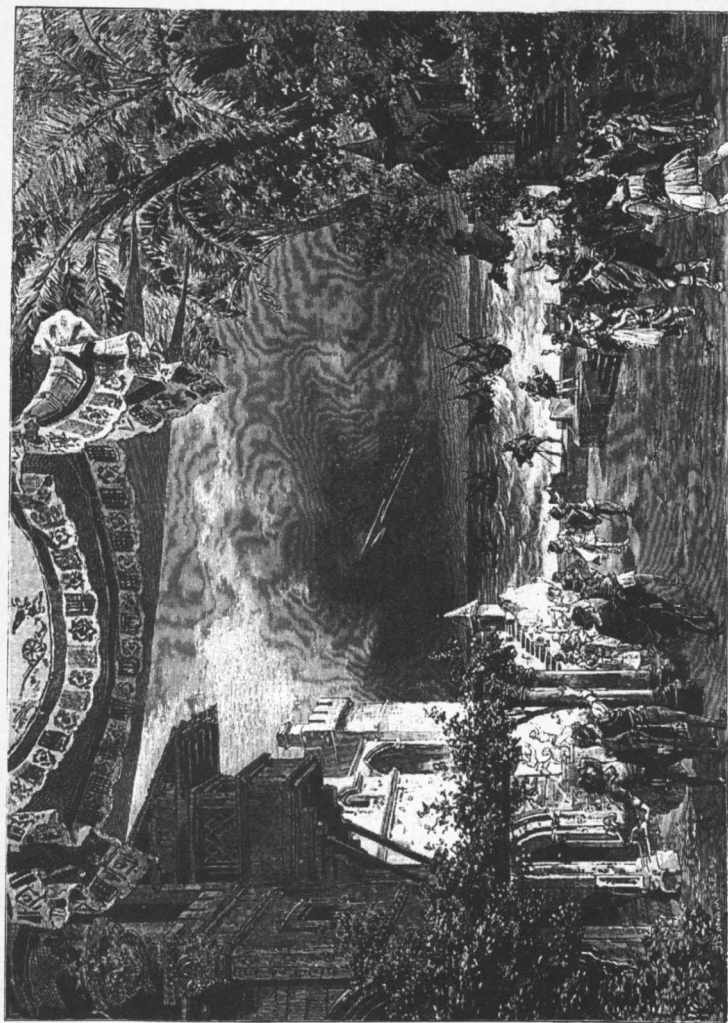
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1 *Synopsis*¹

Act One

With the dazzling suddenness of a conjurer's gesture, the convulsive world of *Otello* appears before us in full boil. It is the most aggressive initial gesture in opera: a wild, *tutti* eleventh chord grasped, Zeus-like, and hurled forward in syncopation – the opera has begun. We are outside a castle in Cyprus, near the shore in the midst of an unleashed evening storm replete with queasy violin and horn undulations and high-woodwind lightning-flashes. The Moor Otello, general of the Venetians and ruler of Cyprus, is still perilously at sea, returning from battle with the Turks. On shore a crowd of worried citizens anxiously awaits news. As galleys are seen in the distance, a group of Cypriots cries out 'Una vela!' ('A sail!'), and Montano, the Venetian former governor of the island, exclaims with a clap of thunder that he spots the Venetian 'winged lion' – Otello's ship ('È l'alato Leon!'). With the trumpet-signals and the annunciatory cannon-shot, the Moor's galley comes into on-stage view. The chorus witnesses its pitching and tossing and, terrified, describes the storm's fury, 'Lampi! tuoni! gorghi!' ('Lightning! thunder! whirlpools!'), *Dies-irae*-like in its dimensions. Insistently mounting judgment-day trumpets, cornets, and trombones push them fearfully to the front of the stage for the brief melodic centre-piece of the storm scene, their *fortissimo* prayer for Otello's safety, 'Dio, fulgor della bufera!' ('God, You the splendour amidst the storm!'). As the music splits again into briny motivic work, they turn back towards the sea, calling for help, for they now learn that Otello's ship is damaged. On shore, Iago – Otello's ensign, and also a villain who secretly hates the Moor – grabs the hand of his foolish Venetian confidant and dupe, Roderigo, and makes his way forward through the crowd pointedly to exclaim to him as an aside his wish that Otello's ship be destroyed, 'L'alvo / Frenetico del mar sia



1. The opening storm-scene of *Otello*: engraving by A. Bonamore, 'La Scena della Tempesta', in *Verdi e l'Otello*, a special number of the *Illustrazione italiana* (February 1887)

la sua tomba!' ('May the frenetic ocean-bed be his tomb!'). But immediately afterwards the crowd cheers, 'È salvo!' ('He's safe!'). Off-stage voices are heard helping the Moor land as the storm begins to abate. Finally Otello himself strides forward in full glory. In heroically sculpted lines he proclaims a victory aided by heaven itself:

Esultate! L'orgoglio musulmano
 Sepolto è in mar, nostra e del ciel è gloria!
 Dopo l'armi lo vinse l'uragano.

Exult! Moslem pride
 Is buried in the sea. The glory is ours and heaven's!
 After [our] arms conquered them, so did the storm.

Followed by Cassio (his captain), Montano, and his full train, Otello enters the castle. Iago and Roderigo remain on stage to mingle with the crowd, who start up a victory chorus ('Vittoria! Vittoria!'): a static but internally energetic *tableau* that serves as a conclusion to the storm-scene.

By the time the last echoes of the storm have died away, Roderigo has moved forward, hand-on-heart and thoughtful. While people bustle in the background preparing to light a bonfire, Iago inquiringly taps Roderigo on the shoulder, and we learn that the latter loves Desdemona, Otello's wife (in the play Roderigo was her ardent but disappointed suitor). Fear not, cynically counsels Iago, she will soon grow weary of her 'thick-lipped savage'. In a cocky melodic phrase he suggests that he has a plan, 'Se un fragil voto / Di femmina' ('If a fragile, feminine vow'). Back in a simpler recitative-texture he darkly reveals the cause of his own burning hatred for Otello. Pointing to the younger Cassio (who has momentarily emerged from an inn to banter with some young women), he claims that 'quell'azzimato capitano' ('that fancy-dressed captain') usurped from him the rank that he, Iago, had more deservedly earned in battle. And now Iago remains only the Moor's ensign, as he sneers in a characteristically serpentine line punctuated with a nasty, final trill ('Ed io rimango / Di sua Moresca signoria l'alfiere!'). Brimming over with malice, he pulls Roderigo to the back of the stage, out of earshot, to continue his vituperation. In the meantime the crowd has succeeded in preparing the bonfire, and the victory-flames shoot upward to begin a second choral *tableau*, 'Fuoco di gioia!' ('Fire of joy!'). The piece is filled with Boitian wordplay and is fully developed musically in contrasting, but

motivically interrelated sections. The delicate orchestral accompaniment playfully juxtaposes graceful legato sweeps with firelight-flickering *staccati*. As the chorus proceeds, benches and tables are brought out of the inn, and twelve illuminated Venetian lanterns are hung decoratively on the adjoining arbour for further festivities.

The fire spent, Iago and Roderigo return, as does Cassio. The first stage of Iago's elaborate revenge – that of discrediting Cassio by getting him drunk – now begins to take shape with the recitative, 'Roderigo, beviam!' ('Roderigo, let's drink!'). Cassio at first refuses, particularly since he is already feeling the effects of some earlier celebrating. He is persuaded, however, to join in a toast to Otello's and Desdemona's (apparently recent) wedding. With affected modesty Iago declines to sing Desdemona's praises, 'Io non sono che un critico' ('I am only a critic'), but he also quietly and swiftly manages to convince the foolish, love-struck Roderigo that Cassio, too, by reputation an 'astuto seduttore' ('clever seducer'), desires the affections of Desdemona. The plan is now to get the supposed 'rival', Cassio, drunk, for 'S'ei s'inebria è perduto!' ('if he's drunk, he's lost!'). Iago calls for wine, two taverners instantly appear with filled amphoras, and the orchestra bursts out, *forte*, with the hearty unisons – reverberating echoes from the Fire Chorus music – that form the short introduction to the *Brindisi*, the Drinking Song, 'Inaffia l'ugola' ('Wet your whistles'). Iago, Cassio, Roderigo, and the Chorus all participate in the three internally modulating strophes of the song, which swaggers with lusty *camaraderie*, although throughout there is also an unmistakable, Iago-led undercurrent of minor-mode malice and chromatic extravagance. Iago's march-like, major-key refrain, echoed by the chorus, displays the librettist Boito's taste for bizarre language and images:

Chi all'esca ha morso	Whoever has bitten at the bait
Del ditrambo	Of the arrogant and
Spavaldo e strambo	Extravagant dithyramb,
Beva con me.	Let him drink with me.

What lodges in one's mind, of course, are the momentarily minor, descending chromatics of 'Beva': two roguish sips followed by a long, and far more sinister, down-the-hatch swallow. Iago's immediately subsequent, almost barked high a¹, still on the word 'Beva' adds to the flavour of excess, whereupon the chorus and Roderigo repeat the refrain with gusto. Between stanzas Iago, refilling Cassio's glass, reminds Roderigo of the point, 'Un altro

sorso / E brillo egli è' ('Another sip and he'll be tipsy'). And indeed, the drunken Cassio causes the third stanza to fall apart: he enters early, he stammers, he forgets his lines, and his legs wobble. The chorus prolongs all of this by laughing at him, while Iago urges Roderigo to pick a fight.

After the last, shortened refrain, Montano enters and is shocked to find Cassio drunk. 'Ogni notte in tal guisa / Cassio prelude al sonno' ('Cassio precedes his sleep like this every night'), lies Iago. The music shoots forth in a series of excitable four-bar sequences, while Roderigo insults Cassio and tempers flare. As the townspeople whisk away the tables, chairs, and festive lanterns, Montano tries to intercede in the mounting quarrel, but Cassio wheels around and, goaded by Montano's also calling him a 'drunk' ('ebro'), draws his sword on the older man. Montano follows suit and a vigorous duel ensues, with impulsive slashes, stabs, and changes of position. At precisely this moment Iago draws Roderigo aside to instruct him, in rapid-fire patter, to rouse the sleeping populace, crying riot. The agitated duel proceeds, with Montano twice wounded, until the warning storm-bells are heard and Otello, now roused out of the castle, suddenly enters, himself holding a sword, to quell the struggle, 'Abbasso le spade!' ('Down with your swords!'). To Otello's demand for an explanation, the still-trusted Iago feigns benign ignorance, 'Non so' ('I don't know'). Otello soon learns that Montano has been wounded, and he bursts into a rage, only to discover immediately thereafter that Desdemona, too, has been awakened and has entered on-stage from the castle door. 'Cassio, / Non sei più capitano', he orders ('You are no longer a captain'). Cassio lets his sword drop, and Iago picks it up, hands it to a soldier, and joyfully exclaims in an aside, 'Oh! mio trionfo!' ('O my triumph!'). The first phase of Iago's revenge-plot is now complete.

In a brief, transitional passage that – finally – melts the preceding severity, Otello dismisses everyone in order to remain alone with Desdemona in the now-serene evening. After he steps briefly to the back of the stage to make certain that they are truly alone, she moves closer to him, her eyes filled with love: a solo, muted cello swells with their emotion. As Otello embraces her, the texture splits prismatically into rich, *divisi* muted cellos, and he soon begins to sing eloquently of his immense love: 'Già nella notte densa / S'estingue ogni clamor' ('Even now in the thick night / All clamour has ceased'). She responds, 'Mio superbo guerrier!' ('My superb warrior!'), ecstatically lyrical from the beginning, and asks him to recall how their speaking intimately together was the source of their

love: 'Te ne rammenti!' ('Do you remember!'), she exclaims, incandescent with the halo of an 'angelic' harp arpeggio. The string instruments remove their mutes, and a grand, measured *Largo* unfurls – the principal movement of the Love Duet – with Desdemona's moving description of her falling in love with the tales of his exploits,

Quando narravi l'esule tua vita
E i fieri eventi e i lunghi tuoi dolor,
Ed io t'udia coll'anima rapita
In quei spaventanti e coll'estasi in cor.

When you told of your exiled life,
And its proud events and your long sorrows,
And I listened to you, my soul stolen away
In those fears, and with ecstasy in my heart.

Otello, too, remembers, and they exchange wonderful, lyrical memories, now military-heroic, now devotedly sympathetic. At the end of this 'reminiscence' movement Otello summarizes the effect of his tales in an *Aida*-like enrichment of the major key with modal-minor inflections: 'E tu m'amavi per le mie sventure / Ed io t'amavo per la tua pietà' ('And you loved me for my adventures, and I loved you for your pity'). Desdemona repeats the idea and a brief coda concludes this section. Increasingly overcome with feeling, Otello longs for death in this supreme moment ('Venga la morte!'), not knowing what the future might hold. He soon feels ecstatic, faint, and is compelled to sit down to recover. Now at the peak of emotion, he looks up at Desdemona, 'Un bacio . . . un bacio . . . ancora un bacio' ('A kiss . . . a kiss . . . another kiss') – the trembling, sweeping, and unforgettable music that will return in Act IV. Otello rises. Embracing Desdemona, he looks at the stars, as once again the beatific harp arpeggios begin to float upward. Then, shifting his gaze back to her: 'Vien . . . Venere splende' ('Come . . . Venus shines'). She responds, enraptured, with his name – for her a holy utterance – and they slowly move towards the castle as the gentle, *divisi* cellos from near the beginning of the duet tenderly bring down the curtain.

Act Two

The second act is launched with decisive, repeated impulses growling in the low strings and bassoons (see also pp. 143–62 below). This type of pointed three-or-four-impulse repetition had been a fre-

quent Verdian gesture – a stylistic fingerprint – at least since *La forza del destino*. Its decoration here with a rotary spinning that sets in motion a rhythmic flow of 12/8 triplets suggests the gearing-up of some intricate action. Now in a room on the ground floor of Otello's Cypriot castle, Iago is furthering his plot by posing as Cassio's friend and consoling him after his demotion. All will be well, he insists, and Cassio will soon be basking in the love of his mistress, 'Monna Bianca'. In gently hushed, rocking phrases he counsels him to ask Desdemona, 'il Duce / Del nostro Duce' ('our general's general'), to intercede with Otello on his behalf. Indeed, he adds, she should be appearing in the nearby garden at any moment. Now all naive hope, Cassio steps outside, deep into the garden visible through a large castle window.

With Cassio gone, the rotary triplets leap forward in the strings, wrenched out of key. Iago steps to the footlights to reveal the full extent of the evil within himself. Thus begins his blasphemous Credo-soliloquy, 'Credo in un Dio crudel che m'ha creato / Simile a sè, e che nell'ira io nomo' ('I believe in a cruel God, who created me similar to himself, and whom I worship in wrath'). This is less 'sung' than declaimed, with sinister relish, in short epigrams. The whole is punctuated with the orchestral support of two 'ritornello' figures, one whose dire unisons and octaves are as close-packed and solid as marble, the other a mocking, dancing figure born out of the rotary motive. One profanation follows another: mankind is naturally wicked, having evolved from 'il fango originario' ('primal mud'); all noble concepts and sincere feelings, justice, tears, kisses, love-glances, sacrifice, honour, are worthy only of ridicule; cruel fate rules our lives. The 'Credo' ends with explicit nihilism, leeringly conveyed and rounded with monstrous, chilling scorn:

Vien dopo tanta irrision la Morte
E Poi? – La Morte è il Nulla.
È vecchia fola il Ciel.

After such a mockery comes Death.
And then? Death is Nothingness.
Heaven is an ancient fable.

Iago now spots Desdemona entering the garden with his own wife, Emilia. He quickly runs to the balcony, beckons Cassio, and pushes him out towards her. With Iago, we can observe him in the garden through the window, greeting Desdemona and beginning to ask for her help. Light, staccato strings in clipped phrases suggest Iago's