



Opera Guild of Rochester Website  
[www.operaguildofrochester.org](http://www.operaguildofrochester.org)

## Simon Boccanegra

Giuseppe Verdi

Lecture by Peter Dundas

1

### Mail Contacts

Opera Guild of Rochester, P.O. Box 25613  
 Rochester NY 14625

Opera Guild of Rochester Website; [www.operaguildofrochester.org](http://www.operaguildofrochester.org)

### Guild Contacts

Carol Crocca, President,  
 585-385-6971, [operaguildlady@gmail.com](mailto:operaguildlady@gmail.com)

Helga Strasser, Trip Coordinator  
 585-586-2274, [helgas@rochester.rr.com](mailto:helgas@rochester.rr.com)

Arthur Axelrod, Vice-President  
 Guild Lectures and Technical Assistance  
 585-377-6133, [artax@rochester.rr.com](mailto:artax@rochester.rr.com)

Marcia Elwitt, Secretary  
[melwitt@rochester.rr.com](mailto:melwitt@rochester.rr.com)

2

Playbill from this performance on December 7, 1978 and a photograph of the start of the Chamber Scene in Act 1

3

Verdi wrote 26 operas, of which three, “Aida”, “La Traviata” and “Rigoletto” are in the top 6 listed in the MET opera performance database. Nine of his operas are in the top 50. “Simon Boccanegra” is number 51.

This opera is built around two real historical figures, Simon Boccanegra (1301-1364) and Gabriele Adorno (1336-1398).

It is also about the events that took place in two specific years. The Prologue occurs in 1339, when Boccanegra was elected the first Doge of Genoa and the rest of the opera is in 1364, when Boccanegra was poisoned and Gabriele Adorno succeeded him as the new Doge.

Verdi’s librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, wrote the libretto for this opera, closely based on a historical play written by the Spanish romantic dramatist, Antonio Garcia Gutierrez.

4

However, there are things you should know before the beginning of this story.

In northern Italy, it was sea trading that produced riches for the noble families in the two ports, Genoa on the west and Venice on the east. They were always fighting each other.

In Genoa, Carlo Fiesco and Gaspare Grimaldi became captains of the common people 'popolo' in 1313. This was followed by a long struggle between the two rival factions. However, in 1331, King Robert of Naples seized Genoa. This led to a democratic revolution in 1339 and the institution of the popular dogeship. The Fieschi and Grimaldi families were excluded from government but served as ambassadors and military men and Simon Boccanegra was elected the first Doge of Genoa.

Gutierrez weaved a believable story for his play, which premiered in 1843, mixing the actual historical events of the Grimaldi, Fieschi, Adorno and Boccanegra families in Genoa, Italy, and introducing a fictional romantic element which is the centerpiece of this opera.

5

Unfortunately, when Verdi's opera "Simon Boccanegra" premiered in 1857 it was a flop; a bitter disappointment for Verdi who was 'riding high' on the successes of "Rigoletto" in 1851, "Il trovatore" in 1853 and "La traviata" also in 1853.

The opera was criticized as one of the composer's darkest and most somber operas. Even Verdi later described it as "too sad". However, Verdi had a special affection for the opera, particularly because it dealt with themes that forever churned within his soul; the use and abuse of power, and the transformative power of filial love.

In 1879, through the determination of Verdi's publisher, Giulio Ricordi, a meeting was arranged between Verdi and Arrigo Boito, an accomplished poet, librettist and composer. The idea was for Boito to rewrite parts of Boccanegra so that it was more acceptable to the audience. Since the age and personalities of Verdi and Boito were so different, this was no easy 'marriage'.

6

The revised opera was premiered at La Scala in March 1881. Today, it has grown in popularity, especially with the anticipated performance at the MET this April.

Essentially, the addition of Boito's great Council Chamber Scene, at the end of Act 1, rescued the opera. The scene adds enormous vividness and power to the opera, and enriches Boccanegra's character so that his subsequent death becomes a more visceral dramatic moment.

This opera requires a two baritones, a bass, a tenor and a soprano, all of exceptional singing and acting abilities. After watching seven performances on DVD, I realized that there were vocal flaws in every one. It was only when I reviewed a RAI Italian Television transmission of the La Scala performance on December 7, 1978, that I thought this lecture project could be accomplished.

The RAI transmission had a 'dream' cast of baritone, Pietro Cappucilli as Simon Boccanegra, bass, Nicolai Ghiaurov as Jacopo Fiesco, soprano, Mirella Freni as Amelia Grimaldi, tenor, Veriano Luchetti as Gabriele Adorno and baritone, Felice Schiavi as Paolo Albiani.

7

The problem was that the only video source was a recording made from the original TV transmission, on YouTube, in Italian. The video quality, for the most part, was acceptable and the audio quality was very good.

However, there were no English subtitles! I decided to address this technical problem, which resulted in my publishing "Simon Boccanegra with English Subtitles", in two parts, on YouTube. My 'YouTube' name is 'OperaPeter'.

This performance celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of the La Scala Theatre in Milan. What impressed me, from my first viewing of this TV transmission, was how it was so "Italian", with the spontaneity of each singer, overreaching and taking risks. This is one of Verdi's best ensemble operas, with several duets, trios and quartets, echoes of what Mozart did in his "Marriage of Figaro". Of course it is true Verdi, with music that is very dramatic and points towards his Otello, which premiered in 1887.

8

PROLOGUE It is 1339.

A square in the Italian city of Genoa, next to which is the palace of the noble Jacopo Fiesco. Paolo Albiani, a goldsmith, befriends Simon Boccanegra, a pirate, because he wants to rise in the world and he knows that Simon is in love with Maria Fiesco who has had an illegitimate daughter with him. Maria's father has imprisoned his daughter in his palace and has forbidden her to marry beneath her station. Paolo says that the only way Maria could be free again would for Simon to be elected Doge by the people.

In Scene 5, Fiesco comes out of his palace and laments that his daughter Maria has died and that he must leave the city. He curses the man who robbed her of her virginity and blames the Blessed Virgin for allowing this to happen, only to then ask forgiveness for what he had just said.

The great Bulgarian bass Nicholai Ghiaurov sings this demanding vocal outpouring in a most eloquent and sensitive manner.

Video Clip 1

9



10

Simon comes into the square and hears the people shouting that he should be the new Doge. He cries out "My name is on everyone's lips. Maria, soon you may call me your husband!"

He is confronted by Fiesco who spurns him. Simon asks for forgiveness. Fiesco says, without revealing that Maria has died, that the only way he could be forgiven is to give back his granddaughter. Simon replies that he doesn't know where she is; that she has disappeared.

Fiesco leaves and Simon enters the palace only to find Maria's corpse. Simon rushes out into the square where the people have elected him, Simon Boccanegra, Doge of Genoa.

He sees his friend Paolo and says "Paolo! I have lost her!". Paolo replies "But you have a throne, you have triumphed!"

11

## ACT 1

It is now 1364.

Twenty-five years have passed, and Boccanegra, still the Doge of Genoa, has exiled many of his rivals, including Fiesco, who now lives, under the assumed name of Andrea Grimaldi, in the Grimaldi Palace outside of the city, next to the sea. He is now involved in a plot to oust Boccanegra from office. He is also the guardian of Amelia Grimaldi, now a young woman living in the palace.

Count Grimaldi had an infant daughter who died in a convent. That very same day, another infant girl was discovered, having been abandoned. The Count adopted the abandoned child as his own and named her Amelia.

The Grimaldi family have left Genoa, exiled by Boccanegra. Only Amelia remains in Genoa

12

Since all of the Count's boys were exiled, the only way he could pass on his family's wealth was if he had a daughter. However, neither Fiesco nor Boccanegra are aware that Amelia is their granddaughter and daughter respectively.

At the beginning of Act1, Amelia awaits, in the Grimaldi gardens, for her lover, Gabriele Adorno. Gabriele is the patrician who has been plotting with Fiesco to overthrow Boccanegra.

When he arrives in the garden, Amelia warns him of the dangers of conspiring against the Doge. Though he begins speaking of political issues, Amelia is able to change the conversation to love. She tells him that the Doge has arranged for her to marry Paolo, (who is now one of Boccanegra's lieutenants and is about the same age), so he must act fast to get a blessing from Amelia's guardian, before the Doge can marry her away. When signals of the Doge's arrival are heard, Gabriele rushes to Andrea for his blessing.

Video Clip 2: This is a 'recitative/aria' form, well known and beautifully sung in many DVD performances of this opera. However, here it is performed by two young Italian singers, Mirella Freni and Veriano Luchetti, in their prime.

13



14

Andrea reveals that Amelia was adopted, but Gabriele doesn't mind and Andrea gives his blessing. Unfortunately, before any ceremony can take place, Boccanegra arrives.

This, and the following two video clips, are, in fact, continuous. I've incorporated them in this lecture because the singing is so superb.

Video Clip 3

15



16



In exchange for the arranged marriage to Paolo, **Boccanegra has allowed Amelia's brothers to return from exile.**

Impressed by his generosity, she tells the story of her past and proclaims her love for Gabriele.

Reminded of his lost daughter, Boccanegra reaches into his pocket and reveals a small locket with a picture of his wife. Amelia notices something intriguing about the locket and retrieves one of her own.

Neither of them can believe their eyes when they see that the two lockets are identical. In that moment, they realize they are father and daughter reunited and are overcome with joy.

Video Clip 4

17



18

In the Council Chamber of the Doge's Palace, during a debate about a peace treaty with Venice, angry shouts are heard from the street. Gabriele, chased indoors by the mob, has killed a man who was attempting to abduct Amelia.

He accuses Boccanegra of plotting the abduction. As Gabriele tries to stab the Doge, Amelia intervenes, pleading for the life of Gabriele, who suspects her of being Boccanegra's mistress.

Amelia describes her abduction in detail to the Council, hinting at Paolo's complicity.

Boccanegra urges peace for the warring factions. "All I ask of you, is peace! And all I shout for, is love." This transitions into a quartet, with Amelia singing "Peace! I beg you to calm your mighty anger" and Gabriele singing "Amelia is rescued, and she loves me!". Fiesco is still not convinced and sings "My city! What bitter shame". The chorus of the people of Genoa sing about Boccanegra "He calms us at his pleasure. His pleas are so moving"

Video Clip 5

19



20

At this point, there is seven minutes of enthusiastic applause by the audience.

The Act then concludes with a powerful denouncement of Paolo from the Doge, He commands Paolo to curse the man behind the kidnapping, and the terrified Paolo is forced to obey, even though he is cursing himself.

#### ACT 2

In the Doge's chambers at night, Paolo sends Pietro to free Gabriele and Andrea (Fiesco) from prison.

Remembering the curse, he pours poison into Boccanegra's water pitcher.

When the two prisoners enter, Paolo tries to convince the old man Fiesco to assassinate the Doge. Fiesco refuses.

Video Clip 6

21



22

When Fiesco refuses, Paolo tells Gabriele that Amelia is the Doge's mistress. He gives him a dagger and tells him to kill Boccanegra.

Gabriele is furious and consumed with jealousy.

He never wants to see Amelia again and is determined to kill Boccanegra.

Video Clip 7

23



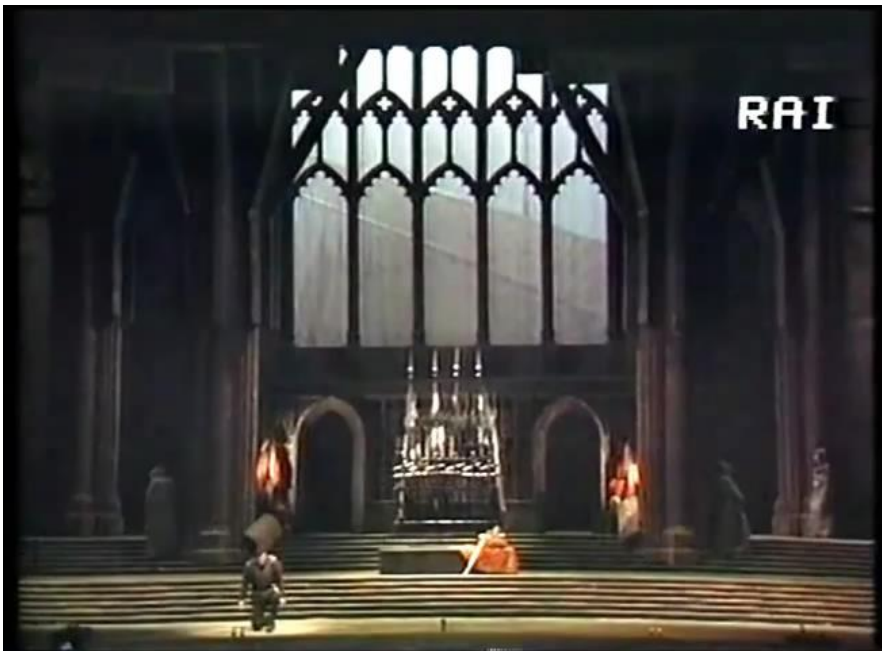
24

Amelia enters to find Gabriele, with a dagger in his hand, ready to kill Boccanegra. She pleads with him that what he has heard is false and that Boccanegra loves him.

Before she can explain, Boccanegra is heard coming down the hall and Gabriele quickly hides.

Video Clip 8

25



26

Boccanegra talks with Amelia and she begs for him to pardon Gabriele. She loves him dearly and would die for him.

Gabriele hides while Amelia asks the Doge to pardon her lover; otherwise, she will die on the scaffold with him.

Having a great love for his daughter, Boccanegra agrees to show mercy to Gabriele. He takes a drink from his water glass and stumbles into his bed, where he falls asleep.

Gabriele rushes out of hiding, not having heard the conversation that just took place, and lunges at Boccanegra with a knife.

Amelia is quick to stop him. She explains that she only loves him, but keeps her relationship to the Doge a secret

27

Amelia fears Gabriele's reaction to learning that she is the Doge's daughter because the Doge had killed most of Gabriele's family.

When Boccanegra awakens, he reveals that he is Amelia's father.

Gabriele is instantly regretful and begs for forgiveness. He swears his allegiance to the Doge and will fight to the death for him.

A mob of patrician conspirators have gathered outside the palace, intending to rescue Gabriele and then kill Boccanegra.

Impressed with his loyalty, the Doge awards Gabriele with his blessing to allow Gabriele to marry Amelia. Boccanegra tells Gabriele that if he can pacify the mob, he will have his permission to marry Amelia.

The revolt of the patricians is crushed.

Video Clip 9

28



29

### ACT 3

Genoa is celebrating Boccanegra's victory over the rebels.

Andrea, set free, encounters Paolo on his way to execution. Paolo admits that he poisoned the Doge.

A herald announces that the celebrations must cease in honor of the fallen heroes. Boccanegra staggers in, mortally ill.

Andrea reveals his identity as Fiesco, and learns from the Doge that Amelia is his granddaughter.

The old man weeps at learning the truth too late and tells Boccanegra of the vengeful Paolo's poison. Fiesco has been freed, as part of the Doge's deal with Gabriele, and is now in a position of power.

30

Paolo has been taken into custody and tells Fiesco that he has poisoned the Doge. He also admits that he's the one who planned Amelia's abduction. For this, he's hauled off in chains.

The Doge himself appears, still unaware that he's been poisoned. Fiesco reveals his true identity, as father of Simon's long-dead lover, Maria.

Simon can now accept the peace that Fiesco offered as the opera began and reveals that Amelia is his daughter, and Fiesco's granddaughter.

Fiesco and Simon are reconciled, and Fiesco tearfully tells the Doge that Paolo has poisoned him.

After blessing the love of Amelia and Adorno, Boccanegra names Adorno his successor and dies.

Video Clip 10

31



32



Amelia and Gabriele return as legally wed, and are happy to see the two men reconciled.

Boccanegra asks that Fiesco bless and appoint Gabriele as the new Doge once he has passed away.

As Boccanegra takes his last few breaths, he turns to his daughter and son-in-law and blesses them.

When he dies, Fiesco goes out to the celebrating crowds to give them the news of Boccanegra's death, then appoints the new Doge.

Video Clip 11

33



34