Forza emozionale? National discourse and La Battaglia di Legnano

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Abstract
This article will suggest how the audience interpreted the music and messages held within Verdi’s La Battaglia di Legnano and suggest how far the sentiment within the opera was understood, in turn asking how effective a canone of nationalist images within culture would have been. The use of musical psychological and philosophical studies – such as those by Peter Kivy and Anthony Storr, among others – will offer an insight into the effect of music on the mind, and suggest how music affects the audience.

Keywords
culture, opera, nationalism, Risorgimento, Verdi

The power of culture, and Verdi’s opera as part of a radicalising canone risorgimentale, has been suggested and supported by several historians – such as Alberto Mario Banti – but how far can one suggest it is effective when one analyses La Battaglia di Legnano (an opera which should indeed be part of any canone, as the Risorgimento’s ‘own opera’) (Osborne, 1985: 198)? This article will suggest how the audience interpreted the music and messages that the opera held and suggest how far the sentiment within the opera was understood, in turn asking how effective a canone would have been. Whilst objections may be raised as to the extent it is possible to historically determine how sentiment and feelings were perceived by individuals, the use of musical psychological and philosophical studies – such as those by Peter Kivy and Anthony Storr, among others – will offer an insight into the effect of music on the mind, and suggest how music affects the audience. The theory of persona, developed by Edward Cone, will also be engaged with, suggesting a new interpretation of nationalism held within culture – especially that within music.
The opera that this article focuses on is a minor, albeit important, part of Verdi’s career. *La Battaglia di Legnano*, brought to life by the librettist Salvatore Cammarano, was based on the play *La Bataille de Toulouse*, written by Joseph Mery. It was written by Verdi and Cammarano in early 1848 as a tragedy in four acts, and Ricordi chose Rome to show the work due to the city having come under republican control through revolution in 1848, which would culminate in the formal proclamation of the Roman Republic in February of 1849. It premiered in January 1849 and ran until the fall of the city in July, being intimately tied to the city’s political fate. This is due to the opera’s plot, which in any other place and time would have been inflammatory to censors. *La Battaglia di Legnano* is set in 1176, and follows the story of Arrigo and Rolando, warriors of the commune of Milan. The warriors fight against Barbarossa’s invasion (with the required operatic counterpoint of a love interest, causing strife between the pair), defeating the Holy Roman Empire (who one could interpret to represent the Austrians, who were de facto rulers over large portions Italy) and defending the city, resulting in Arrigo giving his life for Milan (and Italy; Bagnoli, 2014: 94–97). In the period of Italian history in which the opera was set, the northern city states of Italy joined to fight the incursion of Barbarossa and, against all odds, defeated the invasion. The recall to this period by the opera was clearly a loaded intention; a fractured Italy lay under the yoke of Austrian domination, and it was against this oppression that the states were rising in an attempt to reach unity. Verdi, the typical romanticist, wove the music of the opera and directed the libretto into the final form which, even if a *pièce d’occasion*, was emblematic of the public fervour within the free city of Rome (if not also in wider Italy). After the city fell, and Italy returned to its fractured oppression, the opera was forgotten as heavy censorship returned; even after its attempted revival as *L’Assedio di Arlem* in the late 1850s to appease the censors, and a single showing in Bologna when Italy unified, the opera was still a less than popular musical footnote (Bagnoli, 2014: 96; Körner, 2009: 414).

With its decidedly nationalist story, could *La Battaglia di Legnano* be a powerfully nationalist piece? In his magnum opus, *La Nazione del Risorgimento: Parentela, Santità e Onore alle Origini dell’Italia Unita*, Banti suggests that culture could transform young good families into dangerous terrorists, for why else would they risk ‘premature death, or prison, or exile … if there had not been an ideal horizon capable of triggering emotional storms in the mind and heart’ (Banti, 2011: 33). Banti (2011: 58) suggests that a key work within the *canone Risorgimentale* is *La Battaglia di Legnano*:

> Di nuovo, ecco una comunità di eroi che si forma per il riscatto della patria dall’oppressione straniera; di nuovo, ecco un giuramento come atto rituale che dà fondamento alla comunità; di nuovo, ecco un esercizio di volontà, una scelta coraggiosa, un’opzione patriottica. E tutti questi aspetti ricorrono anche nei primissimi versi del libretto per *La battaglia di legnano*.

> [Again, here is a community of heroes that is formed for the redemption of the homeland from foreign oppression; Again, here is an oath like a ritual act that gives foundation to the community; Again, here is an exercise of will, a courageous choice, a patriotic option. And all these aspects also recur in the very first verses of the libretto for *La Battaglia di Legnano*]
Within both the *canone* and *La Battaglia di Legnano*, Banti makes clear that ‘the nationalist discourse derives its huge emotional power by a morphology’ – that is, ‘elaborate themes and figures [that] contribute to the definition of a discourse rich in references and coherences, a sort of unique thought of the nation’ (Banti, 2009a: 54; Banti, 2011: 53). For Banti, the power of emotion allow members of the public to ‘become both submissive receivers of discourse and passive slaves to their own emotions (and, if they are women, inactive objects of male sexual fantasies)’ – a rather deterministic view (Riall, 2009a: 406). The emotional power of this ‘*canone Risorgimentale*’, which Banti insists upon ‘the communicative power’ of, is what Banti believes allows the nationalist sentiment to spread (Banti, 2011: 199).

How one feels emotions when one listens to music, and how these emotions are transferred, is therefore of key importance in understanding both *La Battaglia di Legnano*, but also the way in which music could be interpreted to have been nationalist in the *Risorgimento*. When watching opera or listening to a song, people will often express that the music has moved them in some way or another – the finale of *La Traviata* (when Violetta finally dies) is a part which always brings a tear to my eye, regardless of the fact that I have seen and listened to the opera multiple times. It is important to make the distinction between who is feeling what when music emotes, as Radford (1989: 71) makes clear:

> A piece of music is simply … a sequence of sounds, selected and organized by the composer … and produced by other human beings. That is all. So the music is not a sentient creature. It is not sad as a creature is sad.

Indeed, ‘a piece of music might move us (in part) because it is expressive of sadness, but it does not move us by making us sad’ (Kivy, 1991: 153) – when *La Traviata* has ended, I do not remain morose over Violetta’s death as I cross Covent Garden. Whilst we experience emotions from music, we are not made to feel truly those emotions. To be clear, we experience sadness when Violetta dies but we are not made sad by her death – much the same way that we experience fear when seeing a horror film but we are not made to fear, or why would one continue to enjoy, or watch, horror films?

‘Nationalism’ is not an emotion as sadness or happiness is. It could be perceived, however, as a ‘complex emotion’, which one could experience, much as any complex emotion. A human will most definitely have experienced their core emotions by the time they come to music; those such as happiness, sadness, fear, grief, anger and love are innate (Juslin, 2013: 261; Storr, 1997: 65–70). It is more complex emotions, or rather feelings, that require a pretext of experience; nationalism, honour or nostalgia are examples of these more complex, learned emotions (Juslin, 2013: 261). One must therefore consider how these nationalist elements could be perceived, and how the audience would have interpreted the music to understand the nationalist elements and to experience any nationalism.

To find nationalism in *La Battaglia di Legnano*, it is prudent to view one of the most important aspects of the opera – the chorus ‘Viva Italia’. Although an incredibly simple
piece of music – especially if compared with previous Verdian choruses such as ‘Va Pensiero’ from Nabucco – ‘Viva Italia’ has an enormity of depth and power, being ‘an idiom halfway between march and hymn, that could be said to serve as a kind of hypothetical national anthem’ (Kimbell, 1985: 399). It is not hard to see how, with such a patriotic libretto, the chorus is indeed expressive of Italian strength and unity (rather similarly to the anthem-to-be, Fratelli d’Italia):

Viva Italia! un sacro patto
[Long live Italy! A sacred pact
tutti stringe i figli suoi:
Binds all her children:
esso alfin di tanti ha fatto
At last it has made of so many
un sol popolo d’eroi!
A single people of heroes!
Le bandiere in campo spiega,
The flags in field unfurl,
O lombarda invitta Lega,
O lombards unconquered league,
e discorra un gel per l’ossa
And a cold flows through the bones of
al feroce Barbarossa.
The ferocious Barbarossa.
Viva Italia forte ed una
Long live Italy strong and one
colla spada e col pensier!
With the sword and with thought!
Questo suol che a noi fu cuna,
This land that was our cradle
tomba sia dello stranier!
Will be the tomb of the foreigner]
(Verdi, 1849: Act 1, Scene 1)

This chorus can be argued to be a ‘Mazzinian’ chorus; it responds to Mazzini’s demand for an expanded role for the Chorus, one which is ‘allowed an independent and spontaneous life of its own, as surely as the People, whose natural representative it is’ (Mazzini, 2004: 55). It is sung in a less structured manner than previous Verdian choruses, in a very free and ‘popular’ style, effectively setting the ‘mood of patriotic fervour and martial determination’ (Osborne, 1985: 196). It begins as an almost natural ‘march song’, and is of ‘archetypal simplicity in a fiercely martial rhythm’ (Kimbell, 1985: 570). This gives the impression that anyone could be part of the chorus, which allows the libretto to be interpreted by the masses more easily – this is emphasised by the joining of women’s voices to the chorus, along with even more soldiers after Arrigo sings ‘La pia materna mano’. This joining of soldiers also reinforces the pan-Italian nature that is prevalent throughout the opera, through the declaration of various Italian localities – Como, Pavia, Milan, Brescia and Vercelli, to name but a few. The message of the chorus is towards all of Italy, and also emphasises the unitary message of the opera with ‘emotive and demagogic power’ (Kimbell, 1985: 564). The chorus is of key importance, due to the fact that it can be found throughout La Battaglia di Legnano, within the music of the opera, as what I shall term the Viva Italia Motive.

A leitmotiv, such as the Viva Italia Motive, is a phrase of music which will often be found throughout a piece of music, but refers to, or signifies, a certain idea, as Monelle (2000) shows in his study The Sense of Music. Indeed, ‘a grasp of signification enables us to find meaningful items in this continuum [of music] and thus to begin the process of analysis’ (Monelle, 2000: 11). The idea of a leitmotiv can often be hard to find within
purely musical works, as ‘music cannot be translated into words’, but often a social code, or indeed a textual addition, will offer an insight into the signification of the leitmotiv (Monelle, 2000: 8, 19). An example of a purely musical motive is the 6/8 metre, which was understood to be the metre used for hunting calls in the classical era. The following century, pure musical pieces used a 6/8 metre as an evocation of the horse, because of its previous signification within the classical era. Therefore, when seeing a 6/8 metre in a work, such as those by Wagner, it is correct to interpret and consider the musical segment as a motive that represents a horse (or military success, which is represented through a horse) (Monelle, 2000: 31, 50–54). A similar, and rather beautiful, example of this is ‘Der Erlkönig’ by Schubert (1815), wherein the quick triplets represent a horse. Intramusical relationships can also be important in signifying purely musical works; for example, a flute can often invoke love, but to understand in what manner one must see its relationship with the other instruments playing in the piece (Monelle, 2000: 20–21). A text is clearly an aid to interpreting a motive within music, as it will offer a level of understanding that cannot be fathomed from a solely musical piece. This is starkly seen with the Viva Italia Motive, as one will note that it indeed contains a text – the aforementioned libretto of the chorus – which aids in its understanding. The Viva Italia Motive itself is a musical representation of the vocal line from the chorus; this is played several times throughout the opera, from the overture to the final act. The overture opens with the motive (although at this stage it would not be understood as the Viva Italia Motive), and it is heard, among other places within the opera, before Rolando and Arrigo reunite, and when Arrigo is returned to Milan mortally wounded. In interpreting this motive, the idea of patria and that of nation marching to war is clear. It is the libretto that is evoked, through the use of the vocal line as a musical piece, every time that the motive is played throughout the opera, along with the martial and national aspects that it carries. The hymn-like structure of the piece also offers a religious overtone to the chorus, providing a suggestion of community to those who are listening to it.

It is more than likely though that the crowd consisted mostly of non-musicians, who would have interpreted the music in their own way (and even more likely that even the musicians in the crowd would not have been able to undertake such an analysis whilst watching the opera). Whilst it is impossible to tell the social make-up of the audience, the fact remains that opera in 19th-century Italy was an incredibly social affair, unrecognisable compared to what one would consider a ‘night at the opera’ today. The opera was ‘economically accessible’ to all, with the upper classes paying for private boxes whilst the lower classes of students and tradespeople sat – or stood – in the platea, the open area in front of the stage (Gossett, 1990: 214). The public in the platea would not simply watch the opera, though; rather, there was ‘free movement … with audiences purchasing food and drink from itinerant vendors, conversations among spectators’ and ‘individuals moving in and out of the theater’, which was lit throughout the performance (Gossett, 1990: 214). This shows the social nature of 19th-century Italian opera, and that the opera house was a hotbed of social interaction for all classes (Gossett, 1990: 214–215).

Kivy (1991: 100) comments on how non-musicians would understand music, suggesting that they would interpret it primarily ‘phenomenologically’ – through their own
experiences and understanding. An example of this would be asking someone to give an interpretation of Mozart’s Piano Sonata No. 16 in C (I: Allegro). A musician might describe the movement technically, being the way that their mind may come to such a familiar piece, as beginning in C, with an Alberti bass in C played with the left hand, before a bridge passage of scales and a cadence in the dominant. An untrained listener, on the other hand, may describe it as ‘happy’, ‘joyful’, ‘like running in a meadow’ and ‘youthful’. Although these are two vastly different interpretations, they are both describing the same ‘sonic event’, and giving each listener their own understanding of the piece, creating their own ‘musical event’ (Kivy, 1991: 100). This is not to state that a musician will only interpret a musical work in a technical fashion; musical training does not preclude one from experiencing feeling from musical works (Spiegel im Spiegel still sends shivers down my spine to this day, no matter how many times I have read the score or played it). A musician similarly experiences emotion from musical works, but their musical training may ‘guide’ their interpretation, unlike an untrained listener. They too would interpret a piece ‘phenomenologically’, although possibly in a more controlled way than an untrained listener, who would experience it fully ‘free’ and in a completely personal fashion.

This understanding of phenomenology becomes an important note in how the citizenry might have interpreted the opera. As George Berkeley theorises, ‘the ideas we perceive by our sense are not real things, but images or copies of them’; when applied to music, in essence, one will only perceive what one already knows (Kivy, 1991: 55). Whilst this may seem counter to what has been previously discussed, it is not. The phenomenological account of Mozart shows this. The joy and happiness experienced in the music were innate emotions which were invoked, whereas the feeling of running through a meadow or being youthful were certainly internal complex emotions that had been learned, and were now associated with the positive feelings which the sonata made the untrained listener experience. Someone else may well not find being youthful a happy experience, and thus would not associate this with an experience of happiness or joy. Likewise, the nationalism that the audience perceived was a learned complex emotion, due in part to their experience in the Roman Republic, which they themselves placed upon the work when they heard it. The untrained listeners of the crowd in the opera would have interpreted the music, although in their own phenomenological way. Of course, the extra-musical accompaniments of opera would have aided in their understanding of the music:

The music is meant to be expressively appropriate to the plot, text, title, programme or character it accompanies. And it is these extramusical accoutrements that give the expressive qualities of the music that has their raison d’être. We need ask no further why the aria of the Countess of the Marriage of Figaro is downcast and contemplative once we know that the Countess is in a downcast and contemplative mood and the text Da Ponte has given her expresses these sentiments. (Kivy, 1991: 171)

Similarly to the example that Kivy gives, the extra-musical accoutrements within La Battaglia di Legnano would have aided in the untrained interpretation. The best example
of this has already been discussed above; it is that of the ‘Viva Italia’ chorus, and its corresponding motive – a phrase of music which will often be found through a piece of music, which signifies a certain idea, which, in the case of the Viva Italia Motive, are ideas of patria and nationhood. Through the libretto that accompanies the chorus, the untrained listener would understand that the music was expressive of a national sentiment. This would then aid in giving the Viva Italia Motive recognition and interpretation by those untrained members in the crowd, each time the motive was repeated, thus aiding the phenomenological understanding of nationalism that those members of the audience had. One may question why La Battaglia di Legnano never became a rallying cry for the later Risorgimento; it is Verdi’s most openly nationalist opera, and the ‘Viva Italia’ chorus could have functioned easily as an ‘Italian anthem’. It is possible that the location of the showing of the opera was key to its reception; the nationalist fever in the city was reported by an Englishman in the city, close to its fall, as ‘scenes of excitement’ which had been common throughout the life of the Republic (Daily News, 1849: 2). The Englishman wanted to ‘let truth be known and proclaimed, that it is Roman people who will fight in the cause of a constitution … I have seen all classes of citizens’, displaying the unity of the city and the widespread fervour (Daily News, 1849: 2). This speaks for the popularity of the opera within its showings in the Roman Republic; the populace were inundated with true experiences of nationalism from their lives and, with the music of the opera bringing ‘about similar physical responses in different people at the same time’, this feeling would have been amplified within the Teatro Argentina (Storr, 1997: 24).

The suggestion that it was the experiences of the audience which amplified their reactions, and tempered their understanding of La Battaglia di Legnano towards that of the nationalism they were embroiled in, is shown keenly in a later showing of the opera in Bologna. The opera was performed in 1860, in ‘a city which had played a central role in the political and diplomatic history of the Risorgimento’ and, as such, a fantastic reception was expected (Körner, 2009: 414). This first performance of La Battaglia, ‘a few weeks after Unification, caused the impresario a major deficit and was staged only once during the composer’s lifetime’ (Körner, 2009: 414). Indeed, the opera was not received in a positive light at all, with the Monitore di Bologna (quoted in Körner, 2009: 414) reporting:

è una povera tela di amori e di gelosie private, mancanti di carattere storico e che mal si rannodano colla gran Lega delle città lombarde e colla memorabile e gloriosa giornata, cui la musica ispirata e calda di patrio affetto di Giovanni Berchet cantò si splendidamente nelle Fantasie.

[It is a poor canvas of private loves and private jealousies, lacking in historical character and that ill-fated unification with the grand League of Lombard cities and with the memorable and glorious day, which the inspired and warm music of Giovanni Berchet’s warm affection sang beautifully in the fantasies].

There was clearly not the same passion in Bologna as there had been in Rome; even Banti, in a reply to Körner, remarks that ‘in Bologna, [the staging] was a fiasco … it is also true that at Rome, in February 1849, its opening night was a triumph’ (Banti, 2009b:
Whilst this is true, as has been discussed above, one can understand this ‘triumph’ and fervour in Rome to be largely due to the experience and interpretation of the audience’s own nationalism in which they were actively engaged; they interpreted the work in their own fashion, with their own experiences, and as Rome had an intense experience of active nationalism, their interpretation was also intense. Those of the newly free city would already ‘feel’ nationalism before they entered the opera house, having witnessed it first-hand. The environment of the opera house may even have been said to increase this fervour — especially when one contextualises where the opera house was with the events happening around it. Storr (1997: 48), speaking about the Nuremberg rallies, suggests that:

There must be people still living who heard Hitler speak who look back upon their emotional response to his oratory with horror. I guess only an exceptionally detached, independent-minded intellectual could have attended events like the Nuremberg rallies without being temporarily swept off his feet.

Clearly there is a vast difference between a Hitler speech at Nuremberg and a Verdi opera (I have no intention of drawing ideological similarities!), but the experience of the crowd can be argued to be very much the same. Indeed, the style of the ‘Viva Italia’ chorus is very similar to the oratory style employed by Hitler and other fascists in their speeches. This conclusion, of the similarity of these oratory styles, is also drawn by Gramsci, who Smart (2011: 29) notes had a ‘suspicion of opera’ which was ‘aroused partly by ties he perceived between operatic song and an oratorical style that reminded him of fascist speechifying’. It is clear that the audience in Bologna was not engaged within nationalism – the nation of Italy had been formed when the opera was shown – in the intense fashion those in Rome had been, and thus did not experience fervour or triumph from the opera. It is true also that music ‘brings about similar physical responses in different people at the same time’, unifying the audience, as can be seen in the fervour at the premiere and subsequent showings of La Battaglia di Legnano at the Teatro Argentina (Storr, 1997: 24). The audience was united in the experience of nationalism, rather than in a true feeling of nationalism. This is especially true in the transmission of nationalism (over emotions such as sadness or joy), as music can indeed intensify or underline ‘the emotion that a particular event calls forth, by simultaneously co-ordinating the emotions of a group of people’ (Storr, 1997: 24). When one also considers that in opera, ‘the music can create an environment that we share with the characters portrayed in it’ (Cone, 1974: 144), it becomes easy to understand how the experience of nationalism was shared with the audience. They would have felt they shared the environment with Arrigo and Rolando and were a part of the ‘Viva Italia’ chorus, a part of the victory procession and death of Arrigo at the finale – thus they would have truly shared the experience of nationalist sentiment. This experience of nationalism perceived by the audience was indeed more their ‘own’ nationalism than that of Verdi, due to their own experiences within the Roman Republic. This is due to the aforementioned fact that people readily associate their own feelings towards music, understanding it in their own manner (Kivy, 1991: 55). Coupled with
Hindemith's (1961: 42) assertion that 'music cannot express the composer’s feelings', and the theory of Persona, wherein 'every composition is an utterance depending on an act of impersonation' (Cone, 1974: 5), with the composer attaining a persona which 'is uniquely created by and for that composition' (Cone, 1974: 18), one can understand how the nationalism that the audience found within La Battaglia di Legnano was indeed their own nationalism rather than one which was seeded by Verdi, to radicalise those watching to national cause.

This shows that the true emotional impact of the opera is negligible; if the opera did make one feel nationalism, rather than experience it in one’s own way, then those in Bologna would have found the same fervour within the music as those in Rome did. Clearly, only an ‘exceptionally detached, independent-minded intellectual’ could have attended events such as La Battaglia di Legnano without being ‘temporarily swept’ off their feet by the sentiment that was resonating within the opera house. This shows how the music was key in transmitting the experience of nationalist sentiment, rather than creating a true feeling of nationalism within those watching the opera, and suggests why there was still such passion in the face of this experience-over-feeling. This has clear ramifications for how one considers the transmission of nationalist elements within culture – and more so for Banti’s (2009a: 54) assertion of a nationalist discourse that ‘derives its huge emotional power by a morphology’. Ideologies within the opera cannot be transmitted as true emotions; one will only ‘experience’ complex emotions temporarily. The audience member will interpret the musical piece in their own phenomenological fashion, in a way in which they perceive. This is shown more keenly with complex emotions, such as ideas of nationalism, which one will formulate from one’s own experiences, rather than experience from the music, and in an individual fashion.

This therefore suggests that La Battaglia di Legnano, or indeed other music, is not a key part of the 'canone Risorgimentale' as Banti suggests; rather it is a conduit. It is the emotional force – which Banti would have one believe is radicalizing – which music and operas call into being that allows a personal interpretation and a temporary experience of nationalism. Music is simply a collection of vibrations in the air, the conjunction of which sounds pleasing to a human ear. These vibrations do not carry with them ideologies, nor any information at all – they are simply vibrations. It is the listener who decides how they wish to interpret them, and this wish is informed by their experiences and self, not by the music. Clearly, therefore, an ‘elementary morphology of national discourse’ that is based on emotion drawn from the works can be suggested to be incorrect (Banti, 2011: 53). Rather, it is the combination of experience, phenomenology and the psychological atmosphere created by being in an audience that creates the temporary fervour towards pieces that some may have experienced as nationalist affairs. How, therefore, could an emotionally based national doctrine – a ‘canone Risorgimentale’ – function, especially in the universal fashion that Banti theorises? Banti’s incorrect (and contradictory) view of the emotional power of culture enforces this, giving unwarranted power to the ability of the ‘canone Risorgimentale’ to spread its nationalist discourse, through opera such as La Battaglia di Legnano. As Meyer states, ‘compositions are the solutions, and we try and infer the problems’ – this is true of Banti, who attempts to infer nationalist discourse from the opera (Meyer, 1989: 148).


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