

## **LA FORZA DEL DESTINO**

Composed by Giuseppe Verdi

First Performed : 1862 (St. Petersburg, Russia) Revised, 1869

Action takes place in Spain and Italy in the 18th c.

### **Introductory Comments**

The casual auditor of this century be forewarned: Here is melodrama of the particularly encrusted variety, and perhaps not suitable subject matter upon which to wean the opera novice--especially not those more inclined to embrace book before musical construct. Verdi's choice for story, however droll by today's standards, was of the romantic stock a reputed example. *La Fuerza del Sino* by Angel Perez de Saavedra, Duke of Rivas, was an early 19th century novel of wide European acclaim. In the master musician's hands an emotionally charged tale can quickly ascend the pantheon of memorable works. Thus we find *Forza del destino* filling the modern opera houses, providing in weight and impact the thrilling operatic experience that is the Verdian staple.

But the melodrama is indisputably thick. For one thing, the young woman protagonist of the tale is so unfortunate as to hail from THE most dysfunctional family in the Spanish realm: She has a father who will curse her with his dying breath, a brother who, as his last living act, will kill her, succor in her short life nowhere found save in hermetic existence in a mountain cave--and these options she earns because she has had the temerity to choose her own lover. On the male side, we have hot-headedness of a surreal variety. Can you imagine two men who meet on the battlefield, distinguished veterans both (assumed identities obscuring their pasts), each saving the other's life in separate incidents, but managing eventually to duel to the death, unable and unwilling to forego personal vendetta?

Balance these tumultuous human faults and emotional deficiencies by acts of religious zeal and self-sacrifice (these latter certainly unknown of our modern era), and you have the peculiar formula only Verdi's allegorical musical tableau could justly render.

### **Act I**

The brief first act, almost of prelude length, is economical, yet striking in its principal characterizations. The vulnerability of the chief protagonist, Leonora di Vargas, is portrayed in her tender opening (*Mi pellegrina/As a wanderer...*), and the impetuosity of her lover, Don Alvaro is revealed in action and in duet. Actually, as the act opens, father and daughter have an atypical tender scene: And Verdi treats his subject of familial affection with his signature violin scoring of beauty and poignancy. Then, when the old man takes his leave from the nightly ritual of "tucking in" his treasure, the tempo picks up with dizzying velocity. Anticipating the arrival of her lover, Alvaro (a corsair of mixed race, half Spanish, half Incan Indian nobility) with whom she is to elope, Leonora sings of her quandary--eloping and enjoying the bliss of a new life, yet anguishing over leaving her father.

Alvaro next at the balcony; she expresses her reserve ('Can't we wait till tomorrow, and papa's blessing'). He knows this will never be forthcoming and they duet with great animation. At one point Alvaro utters: (Gonfio hai di gioia il core...e lagrimi/ Your heart, you say, is joyous, yet you cry?) Finally, Alvaro forces her hand by dropping the line: "Well, if you don't love me as I do you..." --You know the rest kids, that one will do it every time, and Leonora is ready to hop the railing.

Unfortunately, they're out of time. The old man reenters with his contingent. In the ensuing declamations, the Marquis of Calatrava so insults the young man that he offers his breast for the old man's sword, but even this gesture is disparaged by the AristoPapa. To show his honorable intentions, Alvaro drops his gun which discharges, and kills the Marquis; Leonora faints away (having her father's dying curse); Alvaro runs away; and we are all by now properly "strapped in" for the roller coaster ride ahead.

## **Act II**

Some indeterminate period has elapsed, Leonora is in manly disguise traveling with a small group which puts up at a hostelry. One traveler reveals himself as Pereda (doctoral student at the university). This is Don Carlos di Vargas, Leonora's brother, who is bent on revenging his family's honor. He has his aria (Son Pereda/I am Pereda) which reveals, though couched in altered identities, the particulars of the tragically failed elopement. The tavern scene is enlivened by the arrival of the gypsy woman, Preziosilla (mezzo-soprano) who invites all who wish their fortunes told in a lively aria. As the scene concludes, a powerful ensemble develops. A passing band of mendicants, chanting their vespers inspires the occupants of the inn to sing of God's praises. Verdi weaves the several principal characters' ulterior motives/statements into the music: Preziosilla is wise to Pereda's ruse; she can divine he is not what he says he is. He, for his part, professes his oath of revenge. And to augment and crown all the wonderful counterpoint of voices, Leonora's anguish (at possibly being discovered by her brother's murderous wrath) flies to the top of the scale.

In sc. 2, Leonora finds herself at the summit of the hills surrounding the village. Here she has come to seek sanctuary at a monastery. This is the prima donna's grand scena. Verdi bars no holds in delivering the tour de force of the emotional trials and tribulations of his heroine. These are, indisputably, some of his most stirring measures for solo soprano and (when later in the scene she is joined by the Father Superior), brilliant scoring for the bass/soprano duet. First, her Madre, Madre, a hymn which rises to ever more heart-rending heights in her plea for pity, release from suffering and for long-sought sanctuary. A high C crowns the first cadenza, and is followed closely on by the austere male chorus of monks intoning the Latin vespers, almost as celestial repose to the soprano's air. A sublime consort of the voices ensues until Leonora's crescendos crown the chorus and ecclesiastical music ends the scene.

She rings at the monastery gate, and Fra. Melitone (basso buffo) answers the door. He finally accedes to her request to see the Father Superior, who returns with him and counsels the suppliant. When he learns of her reference from a Father Cleto (a respected priest) he is made fully aware of her plight. She tells the father she seeks the

sanctuary of hermitage, and he cautions her of the bold commitment. Here in this duet is the quintessential composition, so sure of its own power of storytelling by vocal score. Relenting, Father Guardiano offers her the sanctuary of a nearby cave, and assures her the anonymity she desires will be his charge. Another ensemble: male chorus, basses and soprano, close out the act, as Leonora offers thanks to God for saving her from the outside world.

### **Act III**

On the battlefield of Northern Italy, Spanish and Italian forces have engaged the Austrian troops. In camp with the Spaniards, Don Alvaro (under the assumed title of Captain Don Herreros) delivers the tenors showpiece recitative and aria. The latter piece (O tu che in seno agli angeli/O you, who in the bosom of the angels) revealing that he thinks Leonora already deceased. Cries for rescue offstage cause him to rush headlong into a fight in which Don Carlos (disguised himself as an adjutant to the Spanish general, recently come to the fray) is involved. He saves Carlos and they become instant friends.

Then the real battle resumes, in which Alvaro/Herreros is gravely injured. This time it is Carlos's turn to save his new-found friend, and he drags him from harms way and to the surgeon's table. Before going under the knife, Alvaro tells Carlos that a secret document in his trunk should be destroyed upon his death, to preserve his anonymity and honor. Carlos becomes suspicious, and though fighting the impulse to snoop, inadvertently discovers his sister's portrait among the effects. He sings the famous baritone aria, (Urna fatale (del mio destino)/Fatal coffer of my destiny). Its cabaletta, E salvo! E salvo!, is an ironic jubilation upon learning the news that his arch-enemy, newly revealed to him, will recover and be available for his revenge!

Weeks have passed in the encampment when in the next scene, Carlo confronts Alvaro with the knowledge of his identity and forces him to duel. The vocal exchange is as exciting as the baritone/tenor collaboration can get. Within the context of his baiting of his opponent, Carlos reveals that his sister is still alive. Their words clash along with their swords as Alvaro tries to reconcile the mad vengeance in the brother's heart, tries to impart his innocence in any defilement, or murder. But Carlos is hell-bent and in the exchange foreshadows his terrible act: ("Morte! --Ov'io non cada esanime Leonora giungero/Death! Before I fall to you, I will reach Leonora") Even in the high romantic-verissimo music drama (known to spawn a few choice baritone villains), this unalterable wrath stands in relief.

Their fight is broken up by fellow soldiers, Carlos is taken off, and the stage gives way to the passing defiles of itinerant merchants, young women from the neighboring villages, and new recruits. Preziosilla is in the party, and she has another lively mezzo number with chorus (a rataplan, or military march and song). It is here that Verdi wrote the dance music for the opera's revival.

### **Act IV**

The final act opens in the monastery's courtyard. Beggars have assembled for the ration

of charity that a reluctant, (and much heckled) Fra. Melitone will soon distribute. Father Guardiano chides him for his lack of patience with the poor, reminding him of his mission of charity. Next, at the gate comes Carlos who has tracked Alvaro to this monastery, where indeed the latter has been in recluse for the past five years. Alvaro is summoned, confronted by Carlos, and finally succumbs--after monumental effort to resist the taunts of his tormentor--to a duel. The writing for baritone and tenor voices here is splendid, incorporating the staccato theme (of the overture and Leonora's anguish) that is the relentless pursuit of fate.

The duel spills over onto the neighboring crags in the vicinity of Leonora's isolation. Here before the combattants enter the picture again we hear her lovely showpiece aria, *Pace, pace* (a splendid soprano vehicle in which she bemoans separation from her lover, Alvaro, and her earthly existence). The piece includes the Verdi pyrotechnics that we've come to expect from the middle period operas, *Rigoletto*, *Ballo*, et al., including a high C at penultimate cadenza and the words (*Invan la pace qui spero' quest'alma/In vain has this soul sought peace here below*).

When Carlos stumbles, mortally wounded, to her front gate, Alvaro cries out for a confessor to attend the last minutes of his victim's life. Leonora is revealed. She pronounces the gloom of the occasion: "*Fatalita*". Alvaro, overwhelmed that he should encounter her alive again, and again with the blood of her family on his hands, intones: "*Destino avverso*". (We are hearing a pattern here, aren't we?) She goes off stage, is met and mortally wounded by Carlos in his dying lunge. Naturally, she lasts long enough to close out the opera in lilting soprano lines, accompanying the melting tones of Father Guardiano's benediction and her lover's salient pleas to the Almighty.