

Can art be a catalyst for change in times of war and conflict?

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This paper examines the role of art as a catalyst for change in times of war and conflict, with a specific focus on the Italian Risorgimento (1815-1870) and the contributions of renowned composer Giuseppe Verdi. Despite Verdi's limited intent to infuse political themes into his works, certain operas, such as "Nabucco," evolved into anthems that galvanized the Italian population in their pursuit of liberation from Austrian dominance (Gossett, 2012; Mila, 1980). Analysing the impact of Verdi's works, especially the iconic chorus "Va' Pensiero," the paper explores how art transcends its original purpose and assumes a more profound significance in shaping collective consciousness. Drawing upon philosophical perspectives on the sublime, the essay argues that art, through the sublime and the concept of "parergon", transformed the sentiments of the people and functioned as a powerful force for social change. The example of the Italian Opera during the Risorgimento provides compelling evidence of art's potential to inspire and mobilize individuals in times of war and conflict, ultimately influencing the course of history.



Nabucco, "Va Pensiero" by Giuseppe Verdi performed at MET in 2002

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<i>Va', pensiero, sull'ali dorate,</i>	Fly, thought, on golden wings,
<i>Va', ti posa sui clivi, sui colli,</i>	Go, rest on the slopes and the hills,
<i>ove olezzano tepide e molli</i>	Where the warm and soft breezes
<i>l'aure dolci del suolo natali</i>	Of the sweet native land smell.
<i>Del Giordano le rive saluta,</i>	Greet the shores of the Jordan,
<i>di Sionne le torri atterrate.</i>	The fallen towers of Zion.
<i>O mia Patria, sì bella e perduta!</i>	Oh my homeland, so beautiful and lost!
<i>O membranza sì cara e fatai!</i>	Oh memories, so dear and fatal!
<i>Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati,</i>	Golden harp of the prophetic bards,
<i>perché muta dal salice pendi?</i>	Why do you hang silent from the willow?
<i>Le memorie del petto riaccendi,</i>	Rekindle the memories in our hearts,
<i>ci favella del tempo che fu!</i>	Speak to us of the times gone by!
<i>O simile di Solima ai fati,</i>	Oh, likeness of Solyma's fate,
<i>traggi un suono di crudo lamento;</i>	Evoke a sound of harsh lament;
<i>o t'ispiri il Signore un concerto</i>	May the Lord inspire in you a harmony
<i>che ne infonda al patire virtù</i>	That infuses virtue into our suffering,
<i>che ne infonda al patire virtù</i>	That infuses virtue into our suffering,
<i>che ne infonda al patire virtù!</i>	That infuses virtue into our suffering!

The question of whether art can serve as a catalyst for change has long been a challenging inquiry. Jacques Rancière would likely argue that art can indeed be a catalyst for change in times of war and conflict. He contends that art has the potential to disrupt established orders, challenge dominant narratives, and create new modes of perception and thought. Through its capacity to subvert established hierarchies and engage the sensibilities of the oppressed, art can foster emancipatory politics and ignite transformative actions amidst times of war and conflict (Rancière, 2007). Angela Davis, in her article "Art on the Frontline: Mandate for a People's Culture," also asserts that art possesses the potential to serve as a sensitizing and catalysing force, compelling individuals to engage with organized movements aimed at effecting profound social change. Furthermore, Davis emphasizes that music, among various art forms, holds a special significance. She contends that music can serve as a powerful tool to sensitize and inspire people to participate in organized movements seeking significant social transformation (Davis, 2010). This essay aims to corroborate Rancière's and Davis's thesis by examining the influence of opera on the Italian population during the Italian Risorgimento (1815 – 1870), with a specific focus on the contributions of artist and composer Giuseppe Verdi (1813 – 1901). It contends that despite Verdi's limited intention to imbue his most celebrated works with overt political themes (Parker, 2000), they evolved into anthems, galvanizing the

people in their quest for Italy's liberation from Austrian dominance. Additionally, the essay will delve into the critical debates surrounding this phenomenon and offer a discerning analysis of Verdi's role in shaping the Italians' collective consciousness. By examining how Italians sublimated the art of this renowned composer, the essay will reveal how Verdi's legacy transcended its original purposes, resonating far beyond his contemporaneous popularity as a prominent figure in the European theatre scene during the 19th century. To achieve this objective, the essay will provide a succinct overview of the Italian Risorgimento, elucidating its key characteristics and the progressive events that culminated in Italy's independence from Austria and its unification as a nation in 1861. This historical contextualization aims to offer readers a framework within which to comprehend the subsequent artworks as exemplary instances of "art in times of war and conflict." Additionally, the essay will furnish pertinent information pertaining to Giuseppe Verdi and his role in the Italian landscape during that era, both as a composer and a symbolically significant figure. Notably, the phrase "Viva Verdi" was employed as a cryptic message for "Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia" and began appearing on city walls toward the end of 1848, a period characterized by the realization of Italian independence (Gossett, 2010). Ultimately, the essay will proceed to analyse select works by Verdi, with specific emphasis on the opera "Nabucco" and its evocative lyrics "Va' Pensiero," engaging in an examination of their impact on the contemporary Italian population and their enduring influence on posterity.

Regarding the essay's inquiry, "Can art be a catalyst for change in times of war and conflict?" the Italian Opera during the Risorgimento provides an illustrative example to support this argument. However, the topic engenders a significant debate. As mentioned earlier, Giuseppe Verdi demonstrated no explicit interest in endorsing political agendas through his renowned works, yet his name became a symbol of Italian resistance, evident both visually and symbolically. On one hand, research suggests that Verdi received greater adoration posthumously as a symbol of resistance rather than during his lifetime, exerting minimal or no direct influence on his contemporaries to catalyse change (Gossett, 2012; Parker, 2000). Thus, his work primarily fostered Italian patriotism among the bourgeoisie during the 19th century, without wider transformative effects. Considering this, Philip Gossett (2012) contends that scholars have recently sought to unravel the myths surrounding the connection between Verdi and the Risorgimento. Conversely, Verdi's composition "Va' Pensiero" remains one of the most influential symbols of the Risorgimento in Italy, serving as a poignant voice of internal struggle that culminated in a revolution against perceived oppression.

Let us commence by re-examining the central question and logically laying the groundwork for its response: Can art be regarded as a catalyst for social change during times of war and conflict? To address this, it becomes imperative to comprehend the concept of a 'catalyser' and agree on a definition that aligns with the interpretation presented in this essay. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, to catalyse means "to make something start happening or start being successful." Keeping this in mind, it becomes crucial to emphasize that the example utilized to address the essay question must pertain to an event preceding or occurring in tandem with the social change, rather than being influenced or solely celebratory in nature. To contextualize the inquiry, it is imperative that the example chosen exists within the temporal setting of "times of war and conflict." To this essay's response, the selected context is the Italian Risorgimento. According to the Treccani Encyclopaedia, the Risorgimento was an ideological, cultural, economic, and political movement that characterized Italy from the late 17th to the early 18th centuries, culminating in the nation's unification under the political guidance of Giuseppe Mazzini, the theorist behind this cultural revolution, and symbolically represented by the military flag of the red-shirt hero Giuseppe Garibaldi, who led a volunteer army during the *Spedizione dei Mille* (Expedition of the Thousand). After the Congress of Vienna (1814 – 1815), Italy was under Austrian control, leading to several independence wars fought until 1871, when it was eventually united under one flag. Noteworthy among these struggles were the first and second independence wars in 1848 and 1859, respectively, as well as the Expedition of the Thousand in 1860, and the third war of independence in 1866 (Treccani, n.d.). A critical aspect of the Risorgimento was the establishment of a genuine national consciousness in a country that was previously fragmented into multiple small realms. Notably, the Italian politician Massimo d'Azeglio famously expressed, "*Fatta l'Italia, dobbiamo fare gli Italiani*" (We have made Italy, now we must make Italians), underscoring the novelty for such a young nation to perceive itself as a distinct and unified entity (Pollicino, 2019).

After providing a concise historical background to contextualize the essay's focus on "times of war and conflict," the discussion proceeds to address the question of whether art can function as a catalyst for change during such periods. To illustrate this point, the art of Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi will be used as an example. Giuseppe Verdi, born in 1813 near Busseto (Parma, Italy) to a humble family, began composing at an early age for the local church. He later moved to Milan, the intellectual centre of the region at that time, to pursue a career in music and theatre (Treccani, n.d.). His opera "Nabucco," first performed in 1842, marked the beginning of his fame and international travels (Gossett, 2012). Following "Nabucco," Verdi achieved further

success with two other well-received works, "I Lombardi alla prima crociata" (1843; "The Lombards on the First Crusade") and "Ernani" (1844; "Hernani"; Mila, 1980). In the later years, as mentioned in the Britannica Encyclopaedia, Verdi wrote "La battaglia di Legnano" (1849; "The Battle of Legnano"), considered his emphatic response to the Italian unification movement, also known as *Risorgimento*, which witnessed open warfare during the revolutionary year of 1848. Although greeted with great enthusiasm at the time, this opera's popularity gradually declined (Mila, 1980). The Britannica also notes that in Verdi's earlier operas, choruses and other numbers calling for liberation or revolt were sometimes interpreted metaphorically as revolutionary rallying cries, albeit on isolated occasions. Massimo Mila (1980) points out that "La battaglia di Legnano" was Verdi's last work explicitly referring to Italy's political situation, after which he ceased incorporating overt national redemption themes. Notably, in 1861, Verdi was approached by the strategist and politician Camillo Benso to run for a seat in the Chamber of Parliament as a congressman, which he did, but eventually resigned after completing his first mandate (Mila, 1980). The most intriguing aspect lies in the academic discourse that emerged from Giuseppe Verdi's legacy, which, on one hand, emphasized his role in stirring the sentiments of the Italian people, while on the other hand, appears to be a retrospective construction by historians, influenced by a misinterpretation of his work (Gossett, 2012). Roger Parker (2000) argues that "Nabucco", though not necessarily a prime example of Verdi's musical prowess, acquired the status of a "national monument" due to its resonance with the Italian political climate of that era. The opera featured the renowned chorus of "Va' Pensiero", which, despite its original context, became a hymn for the "oppressed Italian people.". "Nabucco", originally portraying the plight of the Jewish people enslaved under the rule of Babylonian king Nabucodonosor, came to be associated with Italy's subjugation under the Austrians. Massimo Mila (1980), in *L'Arte di Verdi* ("The art of Verdi"), contends that the oppressed Jewish chorus, unintentionally by its composer, mirrored Italy's situation at that time—a veritable powder keg where "every spark risked starting the fire.". The inclusion of words like "freedom," "homeland," and "exile" struck a particularly sensitive chord when many Italians had family members or friends incarcerated or exiled. Mila further posits that this concept of "homeland," significantly divergent from Italy's contemporary circumstances, facilitated the emergence of a sense of belonging among the masses through imitative arts, paving the way for a hitherto unexplored possibility. This phenomenon became more evident after "Nabucco", whose theme and idea, as asserted by Parker (2000), were pivotal in shaping Verdi's persona as the "Vate of Risorgimento" (the poet of the *Risorgimento*). In this regard, Parker (2000) highlights that Verdi's public wake was attended by thousands

singing the chorus of “Va' Pensiero” from “Nabucco”. Returning to the theme of the creation of the notion of homeland through Verdi's art, as suggested by Mila, by the 1850s Verdi and his librettists became adept at incorporating allusions to the fervent aspirations of a nation and skilfully navigating the scrutiny of the censorship. This was evident to the extent that, following “Nabucco”, Verdi presented “I Lombardi della Prima Crociata”, once again commemorating the yearning of an exiled population for its homeland, but this time directly referencing Italy during the Crusades (Mila, 1980). On March 9, 1844, Verdi premiered “Ernani”, an adaptation of Victor Hugo's eponymous work. Once more, Verdi's chorus referred to the notions of homeland and nation, pushing the boundaries further by introducing the concept of insurrection. According to Mila's account, when the Venetian people, whom Verdi addressed in a letter in 1849 as they were the last to relinquish their fight during the First Independence War, witnessed the scene of conspirators embracing each other and drawing swords while singing...

*Siamo tutti una sola famiglia,
Schiavi inulti più a lungo negletti
Non saremo finchè vita abbia il cuor:
Sarà Iberia feconda d'eroi,
Dal servaggio ridentia sarò.*

We are all one single family,
Long neglected and mute slaves no more,
We shall not be, as long as our hearts have life:
Iberia shall be fertile with heroes,
Laughing again, free from bondage.

They exploded with joy in La Fenice theatre. Interestingly, the widespread belief in the episode of the audience's revolt inspired the internationally renowned director Luchino Visconti in his movie "Senso," set in Venice during the Risorgimento. The performance indeed commences at La Fenice theatre with the Venetian audience's revolt after hearing the chorus ([Youtube link](#)).



*Clip from "Senso" by Luchino Visconti
Click on the image to watch the video.*

As evident from the examples provided, this will not be the sole instance of such occurrences in Verdi's theatrical art, as it foreshadows sentiments of insurrection and social change, instilling in the people a sense of pride and homeland even before its conceptualization. Fabrizio Della Seta (1993), in his book "Italy and France in the Nineteenth Century," asserts that both "Nabucco" and "Ernani" played a decisive role in embodying the spirit of insurrection and revolution among Italians during the Risorgimento. However, he also contends that this thesis has been later downplayed by historians, some of whom now argue that the meanings of these works were misinterpreted by their audience. This aspect is intriguing as it underscores the role of arts in catalysing effects, particularly social ones, irrespective of the intentions of their creators. Della Seta further posits that the "political function of the Opera during the Risorgimento" did not involve direct intervention but rather the creation of a heritage of easily accessible and memorable phrases and images, which served as ideal advertising tools for ideological purposes. Nevertheless, this thesis does not receive unanimous endorsement from experts. Regarding the Nabucco chorus "Va' Pensiero," Parker (2000) initially suggests that "everybody knew that the Jewish slaves mentioned in the lyrics" were "a secret metaphor intended for the Italian audience's understanding". However, this interpretation was widely accepted until more recent research challenged it (Gossett, 2010). For example, it is Parker who

also addresses the claim made by Verdi's most prominent biographer, Franco Abbiati, regarding "Nabucco"'s alleged censorship in March 1842 at the Scala theatre in Milan due to the audience's demands for an encore at the concert's conclusion. Parker points out the apparent lack of evidence for this biographical detail, indicating that it may have been a fabrication by Abbiati himself. Additionally, Gossett (2012) notes that the chorus was not repeated during its first performance in 1842. Nonetheless, it is always Parker who consistently emphasizes the value and captivating allure of "Va' Pensiero". According to the scholar, the chorus possesses unique qualities akin to a hymn and has become "almost a holy reliquary" for the Italians. However, how did this chorus, undoubtedly remarkable but subject to considerable dispute in terms of its meaning, manage to exert such a profound impact on its contemporaries? How did it succeed in catalysing a powerful sentiment—a concept still in its developmental stages and not yet fully theorized in the minds of the audience—regarding homeland, nation, and unity in a conquered country, torn apart by a seemingly endless cycle of unsuccessful independence wars? This essay endeavours to elucidate how such an effect became possible by highlighting the potential of the sublime, which enabled the artwork to transcend its original purpose and assume something different, or even more potent, in its significance. As eloquently expounded by Philip Shaw (2007) in his book "The Sublime," the term can be broadly understood as the moment when an experience transcends conventional understanding, defying description through words and evading direct comparison. It is during such instances that the feeling of the sublime emerges. Over the centuries, numerous authors have attempted to define this sensation. In the context of the French Revolution, Edmond Burke asserted that art is inherently limited compared to the genuine impact of witnessing a public execution in a square. He conveyed the impossibility of imitative arts to evoke the same level of sympathy that a real-life event could provoke in the audience (as cited by Shaw). Doran elaborates on Burke's perspective, explaining that by "sympathy," Burke refers to a contemporary concept of empathy, wherein the audience can observe the atrocity of a public execution while maintaining a certain emotional distance. According to Shaw, Burke's theory encounters a challenge when "the actual and the contemplative collapses," as it did during the French Revolution. Later, Immanuel Kant, in his renowned work "The Analytic of the Sublime," revisited the concept of the sublime, combining elements of horror and pleasure—eliciting a peculiar kind of enjoyment accompanied by a sense of dread. However, Kant also drew on Longinus' ideas, connecting the sublime with notions of virtue and justice, asserting that it is intertwined with moral behaviour and subject to the authority of "universal principles." (Shaw, 2010). Regarding the revolution, Kant perceives it as a "moral progress" despite its tangible outcomes, transcending the actual

experiences associated with it, such as executions and fatalities, and elevating it to the realm of an abstract Idea. Shaw elucidates Kant's perspective on the revolution, stating that "the French Revolution (for Kant) is sublime because it reminds us of the impossibility of giving tangible form to super sensible ideas." Contemporary thinkers like Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida have provided valuable insights into this mechanism, which will be employed in this essay to elucidate why art can function as a catalyst for social change and the underlying dynamics that sparked enthusiasm among Verdi's contemporaries for his compositions. Although Freud did not explicitly address the Sublime, he did explore the process of sublimation, which involves the transformation of potentially hazardous libidinal impulses into socially acceptable forms of behaviour, such as intellectual pursuits, religious sentiments, and artistic expression (Shaw, 2010). In circumstances of war and conflict, this process of sublimation might be even more pronounced, leading to theorize that Verdi's contemporaries may have perceived his works as representing more than their literal meanings, attempting to sublimate their oppressed condition into something greater through the power of art.

Drawing upon Kant's work on the sublime, Philip Shaw (2010) borrows from Doran's explanation that "sublimity in art is based on a (sensible) image of a (nonsensible) rational idea". Further analysing Kant's theory, French philosopher Derrida deconstructs the Kantian sublime, finding the concept of "parergon" as a possibility for coexistence between the empirical and the transcendental. *Parergon*, which can mean "frame," "addition," or "reminder," was considered by Kant as having no function other than decoration, like colonnades around buildings or drapery on statues (Shaw, 2010). Derrida, however, delves deeper into this concept, arguing that what defines *parerga* is not merely their exterior surplus but their internal structural link to the lack within the ergon (or work) itself. Without this lack, the ergon would not require the parergon. Hence, the frame, drapery, or institution that characterizes the parergon is not merely peripheral. Drawing on Derrida's concept, one can propose that the parergon in this context can be likened to the opera in the theatre. The parergon represents the idea that things are not always as clear-cut as they seem and that there can be ambiguity and complexity in how we understand the world. In short, Derrida's idea of the parergon suggests that art and other aspects of life are not just about a single, clear meaning. They involve layers of meanings, uncertainties, and possibilities that can be explored and questioned. The parergon becomes a symbol for this play of differences and the openness to different interpretations, which is a central theme in Derrida's philosophical approach known as deconstruction. Considering this perspective, it becomes pertinent to examine how, in the context under examination within this essay, a transformative shift may have occurred from

the realm of theatre and imitative arts to the political arena, suggesting the opera's lyrics possessed the potential to incite social unrest. As previously mentioned, Verdi's lyrics significantly contributed to fostering a sense of national consciousness, surpassing mere patriotism before such sentiment was politically conceived among the masses who, at that time, were still under Austrian rule and unaware of the ongoing political efforts to unite Italy.

This paper answers the question "Can art be a catalyst for change in times of war and conflict?" by providing a detailed examination of the role of art during the Italian Risorgimento (1815-1870), with a specific focus on the contributions of composer Giuseppe Verdi. The essay argues that Verdi's works, particularly his opera "Nabucco" and the iconic chorus "Va' Pensiero," evolved into anthems that galvanized the Italian population in their pursuit of liberation from Austrian dominance. The paper delves into the impact of Verdi's compositions, exploring how they transcended their original purpose and assumed a more profound significance in shaping collective consciousness. It draws upon philosophical perspectives on the sublime and the concept of "parergon" to explain how art, including opera, transformed the sentiments of the people and served as a powerful force for social change. While some scholars have debated the extent of Verdi's intentional involvement in political themes, the paper emphasizes that the power of art lies not only in the artist's intention but also in its interpretation and reception by the audience. Verdi's compositions, whether intentionally political or not, became symbols of Italian resistance and unity during a critical period of Italy's struggle for independence. In conclusion, the Italian Risorgimento and the contributions of composer Giuseppe Verdi serve as a remarkable example of how art can be a catalyst for change in times of war and conflict. The power of art, as exemplified in Verdi's works, lies not only in the artist's intention but also in its interpretation and reception by the audience. By examining the historical context, Verdi's contributions, and the philosophical underpinnings of the sublime, this paper has highlighted the significant role that art can play in shaping the trajectory of nations and leaving an enduring legacy that extends far beyond the realm of creativity and entertainment. In a world perpetually navigating conflicts and challenges, the study of the Italian Risorgimento and the role of art can offer valuable insights and inspiration. It reminds us of the potential for creativity, expression, and cultural resonance to transcend boundaries and ignite transformative change. As we continue to grapple with contemporary issues, the example of art's impact during the Risorgimento serves as a testament to the enduring power of creativity and its capacity to bring about positive change, uniting people in pursuit of a shared vision for a better future.

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