

## MEDIATED TRANSLATION BETWEEN ITALIAN AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGES: THE CASE OF THE OPERA *LA FORZA DEL DESTINO*

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**Abstract:** *La forza del destino* was commissioned to Giuseppe Verdi by the St Petersburg Imperial Theatres in 1861. The opera was written on a libretto by Francesco Maria Piave and draws its subject from the Spanish drama *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino* by Ángel de Saavedra. Piave worked on the Italian version by Faustino Sanseverino and, according to Verdi's indication, inserted fragments from Schiller's trilogy *Wallenstein*. The opera premiered in November 1862 at the Bol'shoi Kamenny Theatre but only had a *succès d'estime*. In this paper, I try to explain the opera's cold reception focusing on the discrepancies emerging between the Italian libretto and the Russian translation prepared by Apollon Grigor'yev for the first staging. I will consider the typical derivation of Italian operatic librettos from pre-existing literary works. This process combines mediated and inter-semiotic translation, allowing me to show the artistic resources mediated translation offers in stage literature.

**Keywords:** Verdi; *La forza del destino*; Italian opera; Grigor'yev; Piave

### 1. Introduction

Known in English as *The Power of Fate* or *The Force of Destiny* and in Russian as *Sila sud'bi*, *La forza del destino* is the opera that the Directorate of the St Petersburg Imperial Theatres commissioned to Giuseppe Verdi in 1861. After a complex stage of negotiations and preparatory work, it premiered on 10 (29) November 1862 at the Bol'shoi Kamenny Theatre<sup>1</sup>.

This event can be considered the apex of the tradition of Italian opera at the Russian Court. The tradition had begun back in the 1730s, when Empress Anna Ioannovna engaged the Neapolitan composer Francesco Araja in the role of Court *kapellmeister*

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<sup>1</sup> The secondary literature about Verdi and his output is huge, as it is the corpus of essays regarding this precise title, its genesis, and its stage history. I have referred to specific titles that fit the discourse of this article (e.g., Rescigno 1981, Budden 1979), leaving a wider bibliography in the background since a list of all references on this topic would need too much space for this publication.

(Giust 2014), and lasted until the Imperial Theatres kept the monopoly on theatrical performances active, which means, up to the year 1882. The usage of having Italian performances at the Russian court continued, though, up to the first World War.<sup>2</sup>

The reception of *La forza del destino*, however, makes the commission of Verdi's work and its Premiere appear as the last flicker of life of the mentioned tradition, since the critique's reviews were, for the most part, unenthusiastic, and negative was the general attitude of the main Russian journalists towards his visit in Saint Petersburg<sup>3</sup>.

Taken as a whole, the debate offered by public reviews shows how the opera inflamed spirits in the context of competition for the Court's support between Italian and Russian opera companies – a discussion that took place in the broader frame of the controversy on the Imperial cultural policy: those who carried about ideas of national pride and nationalist demands in music theatre perceived the Court's attitude as too foreign-loving.

In aesthetic terms, most of the reviewers point out a problem that, if typical of the Italian operatic tradition in general, seems to be taken to the extreme about this title: the lack of internal consistency of the work due to a too-unlikely plot.<sup>4</sup> We cannot avoid starting from here to proceed with the discussion.

The opera is the history of Don Alvaro, a young nobleman of South American origins, who has settled in Seville, Spain. There, he falls in love with Donna Leonora, who, obviously enough, corresponds to his feelings. Leonora's father, the haughty Vargas, Marchese di Calatrava, violently opposes the match, considering it dishonorable because of Don Alvaro's Inca background. In Act 1, Leonora is ready to give up her family and country to elope with Alvaro. Aided by her confidante Curra, she is preparing to leave when the Marchese suddenly enters and discovers the couple together. Assuming the worst, Alvaro draws his weapon, but when, surrendering to Leonora's father, he flings down his pistol, this goes off, mortally wounding the Marquis to death. The horrified lovers flee and are apparently definitely separated.

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<sup>2</sup> Between the Summer of 1881 and the Spring of 1882, Alexander III took a series of measures that led to the abolition of the State monopoly on entertainment, officially sanctioned with a decree presented by the Emperor to the Senate on 24 March 1882. This circumstance led to the dissolution of the Italian Court troupe, which performed its last show in February 1886 and subsequently abandoned the Bol'shoy Theatre and St Petersburg (Frame 2000). This gave rise to a proliferation of private professional and amateur businesses, including those of Sergey Ivanovich Zimin and Savva Ivanovich Mamontov. After a renovation of the theatre buildings, the possibility remained of renting the Great Hall to various entrepreneurs, such as Antonio Ughetti (1896 – 1904), Akaky Tsereteli and his troupes Nuova Opera (1906 – 1906) and Opera Italiana (1905), Carlo Guidi and again Antonio Ughetti (1907, 1909 – 1912), Renikov and Ughetti (1913), A. Vizzentini. The activity of the Italians in St Petersburg, even outside the context of the Court, ceased in 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War (Godlevskaya-Fedosova 2013; Frame 2000 bis).

<sup>3</sup> This is what emerges for the corpus of documents I was able to analyse, which is partially listed in the bibliography. For a deeper analysis of the context of Verdi's reception in Russia and a more detailed bibliography, see Giust, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> The accusation made against librettists and composers ready to support them in order to obtain impressive dramas had long been present among the arguments of critics even in the Russian-speaking world: even a supporter of Verdi like Rostislav had to admit, reviewing *Il Trovatore*, of not feeling able to report the plot, already defined by a colleague from the *St Petersburg Gazette* as “a complete mess,” “confused” and at times covered by obscurity (Rostislav 1855).

Leonora, cursed by her father, will be chased by her brother Carlo Vargas, who will search for revenge. Hiding behind false identities, Carlo will follow her steps to the Spanish village of Hornachuelos, where he will find himself in a mass of commoners, muleteers, villagers, soldiers, recruits, sutlers, innkeepers, and retailers. In turn, Leonora takes refuge in a solitary monastery: she is surly received by Fra Melitone, but Padre Guardiano (the regent of the Monastery Madonna degli Angeli) agrees to direct her to a secret cave in the mountains. Here, she will live as a hermit; he alone will bring her food, and she will have a bell which she is to ring only in times of great danger or if she is on the point of death.

In Act 3, Don Carlo and Don Alvaro cross paths in Velletri, where Alvaro distinguishes himself for bravery on the battlefield during the Spanish campaign in Italy (the action takes place in the mid-18th century); without knowing each other's identity, they become friends. At the end of the play (Act 4), after a series of further misadventures, the three protagonists are reunited by coincidence (by Fate) back to Hornachuelos, where a final *agnitio* occurs. Don Carlo and Don Alvaro engage in a duel next to the secret cave where Leonora lives. Carlo is hit to death and Leonora is called upon to help. Just before dying, her brother carries out his revenge by stabbing her during their last hug. Consequently, Alvaro ends his existence by throwing himself off a cliff, cursing the cruel fate that has persecuted him<sup>5</sup>.

There is undoubtedly enough ground to understand why reviewers pointed their finger against the improbability of the plot: among those whose writings I have analyzed (which are listed among the references), Nikolay Gubert defined the opera as “a plot that, from every point of view, lends itself to the insertion of effects”<sup>6</sup>. Yury Borodzich equally divided the responsibilities between librettist and composer:

Многие осуждают г. Пиаве за либретто оперы «Сила судьбы»; другие же обвиняют Верди за то, что он не обратился к более опытному и талантливому писателю. Скорее всего можно сказать, что виноваты они оба, так как это дело общее. Нельзя, однако же, не заметить что содержание «Силы судьбы» так невероятно, что, прочитав либретто, любитель и ценитель музыки идет в театр с некоторым предубеждением вообще против оперы (Borodzich 1862).

[Many blame Mr. Piave for the libretto of the opera *La forza del destino*; others reproach Verdi for not turning to a more experienced and talented writer. It can probably be said that both are to blame since it is a joint job. However, one cannot help but observe that the content of *La forza del destino* is so far-fetched that, having read the libretto, anyone who loves and appreciates music goes to the theatre with some general prejudice against the opera.]

According to the composer Pyotr Sokal'sky, Verdi had tried to make his opera clownish, and filled it with “*more numerous than usual*” absurdities (emphasis on the

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<sup>5</sup> Under the aspect of the staged action, the story does not end here. After 1862, Verdi revised his opera and produced a new version staged at La Scala Theatre in 1869, with a significantly modified finale. We are not following this line of research, which musicologists have fully explored (Rescigno 1981; Vocciuni-Gianotti 2001: 23–35).

<sup>6</sup> «канва во всех отношениях выгодная для размещения эффектов» (Gubert 1862).

original), thinking that this would pander to the taste of Russian society<sup>7</sup>. The attempt to orient towards a non-cultured audience, accustomed to attending theatres as mere entertainment, resulted (in Sokal'sky's words) in the "unprecedented falsity of libretto and music [which] constitutes the foundation of this opera: without any restraint, it is sprinkled with narcotics of every kind"<sup>8</sup>.

Criticism was insistently carried forward by Verdi's bitter enemy Aleksandr Serov, a composer and a music commentator who, after producing severe reviews of *Traviata*, *Giovanna de Guzman (I vespri siciliani)* and *Luisa Miller*, denounced the attitude of economic conspiracy that — in his opinion — had determined the structure of the opera: "It is evident that the master wanted to please Mr. De Bassini and Mrs. Nantier-Didiée, giving them a fairly large space in the work. But since both these characters are pure *hors-d'œuvre*, they do not arouse the slightest interest"<sup>9</sup>. In this quotation, the composer refers to the actors playing the role of two secondary characters: the gypsy Preziosilla and Fra Melitone. In the opera, they act in the frame of the popular scenes located in Hornachuelos and Velletri, where people from all walks of life meet in a trivial, almost vulgar emotional environment. From the viewpoint of music history, this choice opened a new perspective in the field of opera, where up to this occasion, environments of this kind and the mix of comedy and tragedy were almost absent. In fact, the expedient of introducing these characters contributes to widening the range of the orchestral, scenic, and vocal characterization, and one is tempted —following the suggestion of some musicologists— to put forward the idea that this conception exerted some influence on such a fundamental title in Russian opera history as Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1869-74) (Budden 1979; Girardi 2022; Sablich 2001, Giust 2024). At the time of Verdi's Premiere, though, reviewers were not eager to appreciate this innovation.

As anticipated before, the circumstances of Russian music life in this phase for sure affected the reviewers' point of view. Nevertheless, part of the highlighted fragilities could be ascribed to a lack of understanding of the subject rather than the work's purely musical features<sup>10</sup>. In reference to the supporting characters of popular extraction, Serov in particular (who can be considered the most outstanding voice among the mentioned commentators) completely misses Verdi's aspiration to render

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<sup>7</sup> «[...] он постарался новую оперу свою испещрить нелепостями *более обыкновенного*» [...he tried to infuse his new opera with more usual absurdities] (Sokal'sky 1863).

<sup>8</sup> «И в самом деле вопиющая неправда в либретто и в музыке составляют фонд этой оперы; в ней разбросаны без всякой церемонии всевозможные наркотические средства» ["And in fact, blatant untruths in the libretto and in the music constitute the basis of this opera; various narcotic substances are scattered in it without any measure"] (Sokal'sky 1863).

<sup>9</sup> «Ясно, что маэстро хотел угодить синьору Дебассини и синьоре Нантье-Дитье, дав им довольно большое участие в опере. Но как оба характера эти являются «*hors-d'œuvre*», то и ни малейшего интереса не возбуждают» ["It is clear that the maestro wanted to please Signor Debassini and Signora Nantier-Dithier, they have quite a large participation in the opera. But since both of these characters are "appetizers," they do not arouse the slightest interest.] (Serov 1895: 1448).

<sup>10</sup> Musical features such as orchestration are mentioned and commented on by reviewers, notably by Serov. Here, however, I would like to focus on the announced aspect. For other aspects of Verdi's reception in Russia, see Giust, 2024.

their minute, humble, and grotesque world, which the composer had undoubtedly captured in the source. It is, therefore, worth investigating the libretto and its genesis in order to trace back the elements that concur to the treatment of the subject, to finally arrive at its presentation in Saint Peterburg. We will consider the literary, rather than the musical, elements of the whole work, to achieve this result.

## 2. The libretto's Genesis

The opera draws its subject from the Spanish drama in prose and verse *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino* (1835) by Ángel de Saavedra, Duke of Rivas (1791-1865). The composer, who often looked for subjects in Spanish literature, had become familiar with this play through the Italian version published by Faustino Sanseverino (1801-1878) in 1850 (Saavedra 1850). This creates a first margin of distance between Saavedra's play and Verdi's opera, since Sanseverino does not respect the formal features of the original drama, which alternates prose and verse and uses only prose. The difference on a formal level is exemplified in the following quotations, which put in direct comparison the texts of the very first scene:

### Saavedra – *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino*

Oficial

Vamos, Preciosilla, cántanos la rondeña. Pronto, pronto; ya está bien templada.

Preciosilla

Señorito, no sea su merced tan súpito. Déme antes esa mano, y le diré la buenaventura.

Oficial

Quita, que no quiero tus zalamerías. Aunque efectivamente tuvieras la habilidad de decirme lo que me ha de suceder, no quisiera oírtelo... Si casi siempre conviene el ignorarlo.

Majo (*Levantándose*)

Pues yo quiero que me diga la buenaventura esta prenda. He aquí mi mano.

Preciosilla

Retire usted allá esa porquería... Jesús, ni verla quiero, no sea que se encele aquella niña de los ojos grandes.

Majo (*Sentándose*)

¡Qué se ha de encelar de tí, pendón!

Preciosilla

Vaya, saleroso, no se cargue usted de estera; convídeme a alguna cosita.

Majo

Tío Paco, dele usted un vaso de agua a esta criatura, por mi cuenta.

### Sanseverino – *Don Alvaro o La forza del destino*

L'Ufficiale

Via, Preziosilla, cantaci una canzone. Presto, presto, la chitarra deve essere bene accordata.

Preziosilla

Non abbia tanta fretta, signorino. Mi dia prima la sua mano, e le farò ventura.

L'Ufficiale

Acquetati, Preziosilla, non so che farne delle tue ciancie. Quand'anche tu avessi in fatto l'abilità di predirmi tutto il mio avvenire, io non lo vorrei sapere. È sempre meglio ignorarlo.

Il Majo, *alzandosi*

Dunque la dirai a me. Eccoti la mano.

Preziosilla

Ritiri quella manaccia... Jesus! Non voglio neppur vederla, non sarà mai che si abbia ad ingelosire quella fanciulla dei grandi occhioni.

Il Majo, *sedendosi*

Chi vuoi che si ingelosisca di te, mariuola!

Preziosilla

Ah, ella scherza, via non se n'abbia a male, mi paghi qualche cosa.

Preciosilla

¿Y con panal?

Oficial

Sí, y después que te refresques el garguero y que te endulces la boca, no cantarás lar corraleras. (El aguador sirve un vaso de agua con panal a Preciosilla, y el oficial se sienta junto al majo)

Habitante primero

¡Hola! Aquí viene el señor canónigo (Saavedra 1992: 52–2).

Il Majo

Mastro Paco, date un bicchier d'acqua a questa donna per conto mio.

Preziosilla

Col miele?

L'Uffiziale

Sì, e quando ti sarai rinfrescato il garguzzolo ed addolcita la bocca, canterai la ballata. (L'acquajuolo porta un bicchiere d'acqua col miele a Preziosilla, e l'Uffiziale siede presso al Majo).

1° abitante di Siviglia

Oh! Viene il signor Canonico (Saavedra 1850: 73–4).

and a fragment of Scene 5, where one can see that the translator replaces verse with prose, renouncing the rhymes, too:

**Saavedra – *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino***  
Marqués (*Abrazando y basando a su hija*)

Buenas noches, hija mía;

hágate una santa el cielo.

Adiós, mi amor, mi consuelo,

mi esperanza, mi alegría.

No dirás que no es galán

tu padre. No descansara

si hasta aquí no te alumbrara

todas las noches... Están

abiertos estos balcones (*Los cierra.*)

y entra relente... Leonor...

¿Nada me dice tu amor?

¿Por qué tan triste te pones?

Doña Leonor (*Abatida y turbada*)

Buenas noches, padre mío.

Marqués

Allá para Navidad

iremos a la ciudad,

cuando empiece el tempo frío.

Y para entonces traeremos

al estudiante, y también

al capitán. Que les den

permiso a los dos haremos.

¿No tienes gran impaciencia

por abrazarlos?

Doña Leonor

¡Pues No!

¿Qué más puedo anhelar yo (Saavedra 1992: 59–60)?

**Sanseverino – *Don Alvaro o La forza del de***  
Il Marchese *abbracciando e baciando la*  
*figlia*

Buona notte, mia cara figlia; ti faccia il Cielo una santa. Addio, amor mio, mia consolazione, mia speranza, mia gioia! Non dirai mai che tuo padre non sia galante. Non potrei riposare tranquillo se ogni sera non ti accompagnassi nella tua stanza. Questa finestra è aperta (*la chiude*), ed entra l'umido della notte. – Eleonora! – Non mi dice nulla l'amor tuo? – Perchè [sic] si triste?

Eleonora, *abbattuta e turbata*

Buona notte, caro padre.

Il Marchese

Per Natale, quando incomincia il freddo, ritorneremo in città. Allora avranno il permesso di venire anche i tuoi due fratelli, lo studente e il capitano. Non sei impaziente di abbracciarli?

Eleonora

E come no? Che posso mai desiderare di più (Saavedra 1850: 83–4)?

In the preface to his version, Sanseverino explains his formal choice:

Il *Don Alvaro* è scritto parte in prosa e parte in versi, e questi talvolta sono *eroici*, sciolti da rima, ma più spesso ottonari rimati. Il rapido passaggio dalla prosa al verso non sembra confacente all'indole della lingua italiana, nella quale è assai difficile verseggiare il dialogo familiare senza cader nel triviale, e forse Andrea Maffei è il solo che abbia saputo evitare un tale scoglio nella sua mirabile traduzione del *Wallenstein* di Schiller. Conscio pertanto delle mie poche forze, mi valse continuamente dell'umile prosa, procurando, per quanto ho potuto, di rimaner fedele all'originale senza farmi troppo schiavo della parola (Saavedra 1850: 69).

[*Don Alvaro* is written partly in prose and partly in verse, and these are sometimes *heroic*, free from rhyme, but more often rhymed. The rapid transition from prose to verse does not seem to suit to the nature of the Italian language, in which it is challenging to put the family dialogue in verse without falling into triviality. Perhaps Andrea Maffei is the only one who has avoided such a stumbling block in his admirable translation of Schiller's *Wallenstein*. Therefore, aware of my few strengths, I have continually used humble prose, trying, as far as I could, to remain faithful to the original without becoming too much a slave to the word.]

In a way, Sanseverino betrayed the original, explaining that he chose “humble prose” to satisfy the Italian language, for which a quick and constant shift from prose to verse seemed unsuitable because it would have caused the text to become “trivial” to his target audience. So, a cleaning up seems to occur during this phase of work, creating a certain degree of separation between the original and the remake. In this first translation, however, the separation can be perceived especially on the formal level<sup>11</sup>.

Subsequently, a new passage was entailed by the making up of the libretto. As it was typical of Italian *melodramma* since the beginnings of its tradition, the verbal text of a music composition conceived for the operatic stage was the result of a complex process of elaboration of a primary source. This elaboration was made necessary by the different fruition of a text by readers (in the case of a book) and spectators (in the case of a stage performance); moreover, it was due, of course, to the presence of the music, which caused music dramaturgy to replace other narrative techniques in the function of moving the action forward. In the case of Verdi's *Forza*, the libretto was produced by Francesco Maria Piave (1810 – 1876), one of the composer's most affectionate collaborators in those years. Unlike Sanseverino, Piave had to elaborate a text to be *staged with music*, preparing it for Verdi's inter-semiotic translation. This produced a certain number of modifications to the source, which are summarized here below:

- shift from prose to verse;
- cuts in the text;
- different organization of the drama;
- reduction (in number) of characters;
- modification of their personality.

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<sup>11</sup> In the second quoted passage, the translator adds the sentence “i tuoi fratelli” with a clear explicative purpose. However, we are not going further in this analysis since Sanseverino's text will represent the central reference point in the following discourse, which is the core of the present article.

Please note that in the elaboration of the libretto, the Italian translation becomes the source, while Saavedra's text is already left behind. First, one more shift from Sanseverino's prose to lyric verse is due to the fact that Italian operatic tradition up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century foresaw only poetry (and not prose) to be sung. If we consider once more the scene that presents Leonora with his father, we can immediately observe this change in the very first lines:

**Sanseverino – La forza del destino**  
**Giornata prima, Scena quinta**

Il Marchese *abbracciando e baciando la figlia*

Buona notte, mia cara figlia; ti faccia il Cielo una santa. Addio, amor mio, mia consolazione, mia speranza, mia gioia! Non dirai mai che tuo padre non sia galante. Non potrei riposare tranquillo se ogni sera non ti accompagnassi nella tua stanza. Questa finestra è aperta (*la chiude*), ed entra l'umido della notte. – Eleonora! – Non mi dice nulla l'amor tuo? – Perché si triste?

Eleonora, *abbattuta e turbata*

Buona notte, caro padre (Saavedra 1850: 83).

**Verdi-Piave – La forza del destino**  
**Act 1, Scene 1**

Marchese (*abbracciandola affettuosamente*)  
 Buona notte mia figlia... addio diletta!..

Aperto ancora è quel verone? (*Va a chiuderlo*)

Leonora

(Oh angoscia!)

Marchese

Nulla dice il tuo amor?.. Perché si trista?..

Leonora

Padre!.. Signor!..(La forza del destino 1862: 3)

The same quote exemplifies another feature of the libretto: while Sanseverino translated the whole play without any cuts, Piave's text is far shorter than Sanseverino's. This was typical of reducing a source to an operatic libretto and depended on the fact that music was expected to significantly expand the performance of verbal elements in the diachronic dimension. This peculiarity implied a simplification in the plot and its progress, which is visible in the different organization of the text as a whole: while the source is organized in 5 days (Jornadas – Giornate), Piave's libretto is 'reduced' to four acts.

Moreover, the number of characters is significantly reduced from 26 *dramatis personae* (to which extras were added) to 12 (plus extras). This reduction entailed a chain of consequences at the level of dramaturgy. While in Sanseverino's text (as well as in Saavedra's original) Calatrava had two sons —Carlos and Alfonso, who concur together in their father's vendetta against Leonora and Don Alvaro —, these two were fused by Piave in a single one. According to this change, Carlo di Vargas succeeds in finding himself in any place where Alvaro tries to escape his destiny: Seville (where the story begins), Hornachuelos, Velletri (Italy), and then back to Hornachuelos. This choice affects the so-called 'constellation of characters' (the structure of relationships between *dramatis personae*) and explains why contemporary critics perceived the plot as unlikely and far-fetched. The fusion of the two Vargas brothers was in a certain way neutralized by the fact that Carlo – which is the result of this fusion – presents himself with different (false) names in different contexts: he is Pereda, a student from Salamanca in Act 1, and then introduces himself to Alvaro as Don Felice de Bornas in Act 3 (Féliz de Avendaña in Day 3 of the play, Felice di Avendaña in the Italian translation by Sanseverino), before declaring his true identity in Act 4. Similarly,



Preziosilla brings together the figures of the Hostess of Hornachuelos Inn (Day 2 of the play) and the Gypsy in Velletri.

Reduction to an operatic libretto also gave way to personal interpretation, which sometimes allowed the source to be integrated by the librettist. Verdi and Piave exploited this possibility by including in the text fragments from the dramatic trilogy *Wallenstein* (1799) by Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), more conspicuously from its prologue *Wallensteins Lager* (1796). Verdi, who had already drawn subjects from Schiller on many occasions<sup>12</sup>, knew this specific work through the “most beautiful version” published by Andrea Maffei (1798-1885) – a poet, a librettist, and one of the composer’s closest friends and collaborators. The Italian libretto issued for the Russian premiere declares as follows: “I versi chiusi fra i due asterischi appartengono alla splendida versione del Wallenstein di Schiller, fatta dall’illustre Cavaliere Andrea Maffei” (La forza del destino 1862: 62). The gloss refers to scenes 8 and 9, which in the German original are set in Bohemia (Schiller 1857: 35–40): to be assimilated in the opera, they were relocated to the military camp of Velletri, Italy. Here below, the most extended passage of this insertion is put side by side with its source (underlined words are directly quoted; bolding highlights discrepancies):

Schiller-Maffei – *Il campo del Wallensteins*

Piave – *La forza del destino*

Un cappuccino

Melitone

Toh, toh! Poffare il mondo! Oh che tempone!

Toh, toh!.. Poffare il mondo!.. oh che tempone!

Corre ben la ventura! Anch’io vi sono!

Corre ben l’**avventura!** anch’io **ci** sono!

Voglio anch’io la mia parte! È forse questo

Venni di Spagna a mendicar ferite

Un campo di cristiani? o siam noi turchi?

Ed alme a mendicar. Che vedo! è questo

Anabattisti ? Berteggiar la santa

Un campo di cristiani o **siete** turchi?

Domenica così? come se Dio

Dove s’è visto berteggiar la santa

Patisse di chiragra, e martellarvi

Domenica così?..

Più non potesse ? È questo, è questo il tempo

Di spendere in bagordi, in gozzoviglie?

Quid statis ofiosi? A che vi state

Colle mani alla cintola? Sull’Istro

Scatenata è la guerra . Il baluardo

Che schermia la Baviera è già caduto;

Negli unghioni nemici è Ratisbona.

E l’esercito poltre, e la ventraja

Qui ne cava di grinze, e più faccenda

Ben più faccenda

Le bottiglie gli dan che le battaglie;

Le bottiglie vi dan che le battaglie!

Mena fendenti, ma co’ denti; involta

Corre colle baldracche, e mangia il bue

Anzichè trangugiarsi il Frontebue.

<sup>12</sup> The German writer enjoyed much favor in the taste of Verdi, who had other librettos based on his production: *Don Carlos*, *I masnadieri*, *Luisa Miller* (from *Kabale und Liebe* – Intrigue and Love), *Giovanna d’Arco* (from *Die Jungfrau von Orléans* – The Maid of Orleans). Probably starting from this fact, Andrea Maffei had suggested Verdi compose an opera on his *Demetrius* for Saint Petersburg (Meloni 2007; Goldin-Osthoff 2002).

Cristianità di cenere e di saccoPer cordoglio si copre, e qui si trescaCon Venere e con Bacco. – **Un tempo è questo****Di miseria e di pianto;** è pieno il cielo

Di segni e di prodigi. Il suo mantello

Spiega Domeneddio su minacciosi

Nugoloni di sangue, e dal celeste

Balcon, come flagelli arroventati,

Caccia fuor le comete. Il mondo è fatto

Una casa di lagrime. Nel sangue

Nuota l'arca di Pietro; e se l'ajuto

Del Signor non provvede, il sacro Impero

Dirà tra poco: Io pero! Il fiume Reno

Ha più *lutti* che *flutti*. Ogni conventoOra è covo del vento; i santuariSpelonche diventar di sanguinari;E fino i tabernacoli di CristoSon fatti ricettacoli del tristo!

Così che la fiorente e benedetta

Tedesca plaga con ragion potrebbe

Dirsi tedesca piaga. – Or chi ne manda

Tutti a soquadro? Uditelo, figliuoli!Sono i vostri peccati, i vizj vostri;

Quel vivere idolatra, a cui vi date

Capitani e soldati [...] (Schiller 1857: 35–7)

E invece di vestir cenere e sacco,Qui si tresca con Venere e con Bacco!**Il mondo è fatto una casa di pianto;**Ogni convento, oh qual profanazione!Or è covo del vento!.. I santuariSpelonche diventar di sanguinariE fino i tabernacoli del Nume**Fatti son ricettacoli del tristo.**Tutto è a soquadro... e la ragion? pe' vostri  
**Peccati** (La forza del destino 1862: 62–4).

Verdi's attention was probably brought to these scenes because of their popular characterization: following the line that Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873) had espoused in the novel *The Betrothed* (*I promessi sposi*) in reference to the Milanese context (Franco 1961)<sup>13</sup>, the composer should have found them suitable to the social environment he wanted to portrait in his opera. They gave way to a wide representation of the philosophy of the opera: it shows the manifestation of fate in all its pervasive power. Destiny drives the main characters' lives as well as those of the ones who surround them. Although Don Carlo still appears as a remnant of the antagonist in a triangle relationship with a couple of lovers, in Verdi's opera, destiny goes beyond their relationship to embrace a wider horizon. Its effects cover a more expansive space, which, in line with Manzoni, includes figures that are not essential to the plot's structure, though they represent the world in all its variety<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Verdi writes about Manzoni in his letter to Clara Maffei of 21 May 1867; the composer and the writer met in Milan on 30 June 1868, when the writer was 80 years old.

<sup>14</sup> One point should be highlighted, though, since it represents a watermark distinguishing Manzoni's thought from Verdi's. The composer never reached the intensity of Christian faith showed by Manzoni in his novel: in *The Betrothed*, the variety of adventures the characters are involved in is to be brought together under the idea of the divine Providence; Verdi, differently, remains more faithful to a laic idea of faith, which possibly was among the aspects that most attracted him in the play. In

The scenes with these picturesque characters —in which the protagonist is the mass and the figures of Melitone and Preziosilla act as their spokespersons— attracted much of the Russian press’s criticism. In particular, Serov’s reference to these characters as “*hors d’œuvre*” could refer to the spurious nature of these fragments, but the Russian translation Serov probably read to become acquainted with the plot before the Premiere does not account for their origin. This observation leads us to a last passage in our reasoning, which —I believe— sheds new light on the global picture of this opera’s reception in Russia.

### 3. From *La forza del destino* to *Sila sud’bī*

As usual, the Italian libretto was published for the first staging; the local usage envisaged the publication in Italian, — the language in which the opera was sung, — and Russian (*La forza del destino* 1862), – the language in which the audience would read the text: the translation was authored by Apollon Aleksandrovich Grigor’ev (1822 – 1864), a professional translator with much experience in the dramaturgical field, who had previously translated works by classics of dramatic theatre and many Italian and German librettos<sup>15</sup>.

If we compare the two versions of the libretto, something seems to be lost in translation: small but numerous details (such as omissions or misunderstanding on the part of the translator) possibly hampered the readers’ understanding of crucial dramaturgical moments and characters’ profiles.

In most of these cases it is hard to identify them as mistakes, and deviations are difficult to account for, and to count in the perspective of a quantitative analysis. Nonetheless, it can be pointed out that we observe this phenomenon notably in reference to the figure of Melitone. Verdi considered this character as a “most important” role of a “brilliant baritone”<sup>16</sup>, and therefore asked for the collaboration of the experienced bass Achille De Bassini (1819-1881). Writing to the singer, he defined this role as “funny, very charming,” and “tailored according to [his] personality,” referring notably to his “joking mood that perfectly fits the character”:

Io ho una parte per te, se la vorrai accettare, buffa, graziosissima, ed è quella di Fra Melitone. Ti starà a pennello ed io quasi l’ho quasi [sic] identificata alla tua persona.

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any case, the music was, in his view, responsible for integrating the multiple misadventures of the plot in one, unified work (Budden 1979).

<sup>15</sup> Grigor’ev authored the Russian version of works by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Molière, and Delavigne. He translated from German the text of Anton Rubinshteyn’s opera *Die Kinder der Heide* (*Deti stepy, ili Ukrainskiye tsigane*, 1859-60), and Italian operas by Rossini (*Graf Ori*, *Sorokavorovka*, *Chenerentola* and others), Donizetti (*Don Pasquale*, *Marija de Rogan*, *Lyuchiya de Lamermur*, *Favoritka*, and others), Bellini (*Kapuletti i Montekki*, *Sonnambula*), Pedrotti (*Fiorina*), Mozart (*Don Zhuan*), Beethoven (*Fidelio*), Gounod (*Faust*), Meyerbeer (*Robert-d’yavol*, *Osada Genta*), Boïeldieu (*La dame blanche – Belaya dama*), Verdi (*Un ballo in maschera*, *Rigoletto*, *Traviata*, *Trovatore*, and *Ermani*) (Ob’yavleniye 1863: 10; Gardzonio 2008: 348).

<sup>16</sup> “Un Baritono brillante per la parte di Fra Melitone, parte pure importantissima. Potrebbe essere De Bassini al quale anzi ho scritto, ma non so se Egli può, deve o vorrà fare tale parte.” Verdi to Achille Tamberlick, Busseto, 30 ottobre 1861 (Rescigno, 1981: 41).

Non che tu sia buffone, ma hai una certa vena scherzevole, che quadra perfettamente col personaggio che ti ho destinato, previa la tua approvazione.<sup>17</sup>

[I have a part for you, if you want to accept it, funny, very charming: it is that of Fra Melitone. It will fit you like a glove, and I have almost tailored it according to your personality. Not that you are a buffoon, but you have a certain joking streak, which perfectly fits the character I have assigned to you, pending your approval.]

In Grigor'yev's translation, however, part of the character's comedy conceived by Verdi appears neutralized and deprived of humour: examples can be found in various text passages. For instance, in Act 2, Scene 6 (Madonna degli Angeli monastery, near Hornachuelos), Melitone's self-referential jokes in his dialogue with Leonora are merely removed:

LEONORA		ЛЕОНОРА	
Il superiore		О ради Бога! Нужно	
	Per carità!		Приора мне!
MELITONE		МЕЛИТОНЕ	
<b>Che carità a quest'ora!</b>		<b>Зачем так поздно ночью?</b>	
LEONORA		ЛЕОНОРА	
Mi manda padre Cleto.		Меня шлет падре Клето.	
MELITONE		МЕЛИТОНЕ	
<b>Quel sant'uomo!.. Il motivo?</b>		<b>Как падре Клето?.. Но зачем же?</b>	
LEONORA		ЛЕОНОРА	
Urgente		Необходимо...	
MELITONE		МЕЛИТОНЕ	
Perchè [sic] mai?...		Что же?	
LEONORA		ЛЕОНОРА	
Un'infelice...		Один несчастный...	
MELITONE		МЕЛИТОНЕ	
<b>Brutta solfa, però v'apro...</b> (La forza del destino 1862: 32)		<b>Так отпру я дверь вам...</b> (La forza del destino 1862: 33)	

“Kak padre Kleto?” —an expression of surprise towards Leonora's request—, cannot be considered the equivalent to Melitone's sarcastic comment “Quel sant'uomo!..” (A Saint, indeed); the same can be said of “Brutta solfa” (A bad story), which disappears in “Tak otopru ya dver' vam...” (I'll open the door for you).

A similar dynamic can be observed in Act 4, Scene 2 (at Madonna degli Angeli monastery), where Melitone's sarcastic comments on the poor pilgrims (first quote) and (in the second quote) Don Carlos and are reduced to a standard, neutral tone:

MELITONE	МЕЛИТОНЕ
Ma tai pezzenti son di fecondità	Народят детей – да и пойдут
Davvero spaventosa...	Таскаться по миру.
GUARDIANO	ГВАРДИАНО

<sup>17</sup> Verdi ad Achille De Bassini, [Busseto], 26 ottobre 1861 (Abbiati 1959: 660–1; Rescigno 1981: 41n; Luzzo 1935: 62).

Abbate carità!	Будь милосерд!
VECCHI	СТАРИКИ
<b>Un po' di quel fondaccio ancora ne donate</b>	<b>Вы нам еще хотя немного дайте!</b>
MELITONE	МЕЛИТОНЕ
<b>Il ben di Dio, bricconi, fondaccio voi chiamate?</b>	<b>Мощенники – всегда-то мало им...</b>
ALCUNI	НЕКОТОРЫЕ
A me, padre! ( <i>presentando le scodelle.</i> )	Мне, падре! ( <i>подставляя ему чашки</i> )
ALTRI	ДРУГИЕ
A me!..	Мне...
MELITONE ( <i>impazientato</i> )	МЕЛИТОНЕ ( <i>С досадой</i> )
<b>Oh andatemi in malora</b> (La forza del destino 1862: 76)	<b>Ступайте от меня</b> (La forza del destino 1862: 77)

And further, in Scene 4:

DON CARLO ( <i>con alterezza</i> )	ДОН КАРЛО ( <i>гордо</i> )
Siete il portiere?...	Вы не привратник ли?
MELITONE	<b>(Что важничает так он?)</b>
<b>(È goffo ben costui!)</b>	<b>Кого здесь нужно вам?</b>
<b>Se v'apersi, parmi...</b>	ДОН КАРЛО
DON CARLO	Мне? Падре Раффаеле.
Il padre Raffaele?	МЕЛИТОНЕ (Зачем бы?)
VECCHI (Un altro!) Due ne abbiamo.	Двое их у нас:
<b>L'un di Porcunna, grasso,</b>	<b>Один старик и толстый</b>
<b>Sordo com'una talpa;</b> l'altro scarno,	<b>Да и притом</b>
Bruno, occhi... Ciel qual occhi!	<b>глухой,</b> другой, другой же мрачный...
	И смугл... глаза... Глаза ужасные!... Кого же?
Voi chi chiedete?	ДОН КАРЛО
DON CARLO	Мне адского.
Quel dell'inferno	МЕЛИТОНЕ
MELITONE	<b>(Он дьявол!)</b>
<b>(È desso!)</b> E chi gli annuncio?	Как сказать о вас?
DON CARLO Un cavaliere...	ДОН КАРЛО
MELITONE	Да просто кавалер...
<b>(Qual boria! È un mal arnese!)</b> (La forza del destino 1862: 80–2)	МЕЛИТОНЕ
	<b>(Глаза так и гордят!)</b> (La forza del destino 1862: 81–3)

In the first fragment, the gravity of Melitone's "These beggars are incredibly fertile" is reduced in "Narodyat detey" ([pilgrims] give birth to children), so is as regards the appellation "andatemi in malora" (Damn you!), which has no stylistic equivalent in the more neutral "Stupayte ot menya" (Go ahead).

The second quote, the question "Chto vazhnicayet on?" (Why does he act so self-importantly?) underlines the attitude of Don Carlo but completely loses the irony Melitone has on him since his observation *a parte* "He's very clumsy!" (for the Italian "goffo") refers to Carlo's superfluous (silly) question, and motivates his answer (So it seems, once I've opened...). At the end of the fragment, Melitone lets us know that he

understands that something wrong will happen: his comment, “It’s a bad business,” contributes to creating suspense on a dramaturgical level. On the contrary, the Russian translation “Glaza tak i gordyat!” (which we can understand as “His eyes are so proud!”) is more centered on Carlos’s attitude, repeating the idea already expressed. The exclamation is connected with the following comment “He’s a devil!” which replaces “It’s him!” – words through which Melitone lets us know he understood which of the two Raffaeles Carlos is asking for. Grigor’yev misses (or consciously ignores) the significance of single lines in Verdi’s dramaturgy, neutralizing the double standard kept by the character of Melitone, who addresses the audience while carrying on his dialogue with Carlos. Possibly, Grigor’yev underestimated the importance Verdi attributed to this dynamic, which was essential to Italian operatic theatre. Consequently, he thus ignores the role of the so-called *parola scenica*, so essential to the efficiency of the play when the music was added, and therefore related to the performance’s outcome (Della Seta 1994).

#### 4. Conclusion

These and other similar discrepancies that emerge from the comparison — analyzing the translation, one can see that the theme of Alvaro’s obscure origins is also confused, as is the relationship between Preziosilla and Carlos— suggest that the translation could have mined a correct understanding of the work as a whole. Consistently with Verdi’s attention to the relationship between (scenic) word and music, the music better responds to the Italian libretto than it could have been with its Russian translation, through which Serov and colleagues probably became acquainted with the subject and its treatment<sup>18</sup>.

On the one hand, Serov and colleagues’ incapacity to appreciate Verdi could be explained by the general conservatism of the Russian audience towards Italian opera, whose role was since the very beginning to celebrate Crowned Heads exclusively on the stage, and therefore did not allow for popular characters on stage<sup>19</sup>. It is also to be considered that the aesthetic vogue of truculent scenes on stage was already overcome in Europe by the time Verdi composed *La forza del destino*, an aspect that indeed

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<sup>18</sup> Days before the Premiere, articles were published with the aim of preparing the audience to the performance (See, for instance, “Z” 1862; “Z” 1862 bis).

<sup>19</sup> For a testimony of this perception, one can read one of the earliest definitions of opera in the Russian contest, which set the tone for the subsequent reception of Italian opera: “От обоих сих театральных действий опера весьма разнствует. Она кроме богов и храбрых героев никому на театре быть не позволяет. Все в ней есть знатно, великолепно и удивительно. В ее содержании ничто находиться не может, как токмо высокая и несравненная действия, божественныя в человеке свойства, благополучное состояние мира и златые веки собственно в ней показываются. (Compared to both of these actions [comedy and tragedy], opera differs considerably. It admits none but brave gods and heroes onto the scene. Everything about it is illustrious, grandiose and astonishing. Among its arguments nothing can be shown but a high and incomparable action, divine properties in man, a happy arrangement of things, and a golden age.) (Stählin 1995: 532).

pushed Verdi himself to redefine the final solution of the play<sup>20</sup>.

On the other hand, audiences hardly knew Italian and, therefore, had to refer to Grigor'yev's text to follow the action. His role was, therefore, crucial in the reception of the opera. In his translation of the Italian libretto, the Russian writer seems to have ignored or misunderstood the style and the dramatic strategies that Piave had embraced in it following Verdi's intentions. Similarly, he was possibly responsible (at least, partially) for the missed recognition of the influence exerted on Piave/Verdi by Schiller and Manzoni, which caused partial disagreement between the image Russian readers could build on the Russian libretto and the opera as it was performed in St Petersburg with singing in Italian. The translator's inadequacy (or creative attitude?)—attested by his version's lack of humour and grotesqueness—results in what Borodzich described as the audience going to the theatre “with some general prejudice against the opera.”

By its complex genesis and history, this opera proves an outstanding case demonstrating the scale of artistic resources, but also of misunderstanding, offered by mediated translation in the field of music stage literature.

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<sup>20</sup> According to Javier Roberto González, “lo que el maestro comenzó a deplorar de tantas muertes amontonadas en escena, los tintes excesivamente negros de ese recurso grueso. En la década del sesenta del siglo XIX, cuando la ópera fue compuesta y revisada, la etapa más frenética y satanista del romanticismo, plenamente vigente cuando el duque redactó su drama, ya había perdido actualidad, y los efectos teatrales de directa atrocidad, las catástrofes por acumulación desmedida y los grandes gestos de patetismo y horror empezaban a resultar desagradables” (González 2010: 88).

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