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Attila the Nazi

by Paul du Quenoy

At a recent talk for his new book on the Battle of Arnhem, the renowned British military historian Sir Antony Beevor accounted for the enduring popularity of World War II histories because of the compelling moral questions the war raises. Even as history collapses as a scholarly discipline, new generations search so enthusiastically for challenge and validation in history's greatest conflict that popular culture seems to be running out of things to save from the Nazis. The fine arts are no exception, and hardly any operas featuring a villainous warlord and oppressed people have escaped recasting as a World War II–era struggle between good and evil.

This trope was not lost on the Italian director Davide Livermore. His production of Verdi's *Attila* for La Scala's lavish opening-night gala in Milan set the action in the oft-overlooked moment in the war when Italy changed sides and provoked Hitler's fury. Following this turnabout, German forces already in Italy disarmed their hosts, killed those who resisted, and placed the ousted Mussolini in charge of a puppet fascist regime after rescuing him from confinement in a ski lodge. In this production, Attila rides in on a black horse at the head of an army of Huns clad in what could be SS uniforms (though mercifully without the infamous insignia). The Roman underdogs who resist him and, in the opera's best chorus, found the city of Venice in the process are 1940s-vintage civilians or soldiers sporting tan uniforms that recall Italy's ill-fated role in the North African campaign. Their spiritual leadership comes from the opera's fifth-century "old Roman," a thin mask for Pope Leo I (*ca.* 400–61), who enters in full papal garb on a white steed.

Saioa Hernández as Odabella & Ildar Abdrazakov in the title role in Attila. *Photo: Courtesy of Teatro alla Scala.*

"Have the whole universe, but leave Italy to me!" is a line drew frenzied applause from nineteenth-century Italian audiences, but only true cognoscenti seemed to recognize its importance in 2018.

The concept is not completely off the wall, but it does underserve the opera's true cultural context. With a premiere just two years before the Revolutions of 1848 nearly toppled the Habsburg hegemony throughout the Italian peninsula (full liberation lay decades in the future), Verdi's opera presented Attila ahistorically, as a Germanic warlord who worships the Norse god Odin (some years before that deity found onstage personification in Wagner's oeuvre). Its most politically significant line, achingly pronounced by the scheming Roman general Ezio, implores the Hun chieftain to "have the whole universe, but leave Italy to me!" The line drew frenzied applause from nineteenth-century Italian audiences, but only true cognoscenti seemed to recognize its importance in 2018. Perhaps it now alludes to Italy's current political situation: its latest government is controlled by two populist parties with hard lines on immigration and the European Union. The country's centrist president, Sergio Mattarella, who has promised to restrain their excesses, attended the performance under review and received a prolonged standing ovation from Milan's Europphilic elites and assorted celebrities, while the traditional communist and anti-globalist protest across the square was small and muted.

The production's visual effects left a deeper impression. The sets mostly depict an urban landscape devasted by street fighting, though to show sensitivity to the recent catastrophic collapse of a

bridge in Genoa, Livermore backed off from a scenic effect calling for a bridge to be blown up at the height of Ezio's confrontation with Attila. Instead it merely separates after explosive charges ignite. The Huns make their entrance to an oddly jolly chorus about their murder and mayhem and dispatch hapless Roman refugees by firing squad. Attila's wedding feast grafts sadomasochistic themes onto the pseudo-Nazi costumes in a way that recalls the creepier moments in Roberto Rossellini's noirish 1945 film *Rome, Open City*, set on the eve of Rome's liberation in 1944, when the Gestapo still lurked in the city streets.

Ildar Abdrazakov and the cast of Attila. *Photo: Courtesy of Teatro alla Scala.*

Attila was written toward the beginning of Verdi's career. Just thirty-three at the time of its premiere in 1846, the young composer was still developing his style along a learning curve that ascended from the exhausted bel canto milieu of his youth to the nearly cinematic effects of his final operas, *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). The plot follows a spurious story that Attila was murdered by his captive bride at their wedding shortly after he abandoned his Italian campaign. It is far more likely that he died of internal bleeding after a bout of drinking, but the romantic tale and its pseudo-biblical overtones suggested to Verdi that he change the military history to allow the uxorious murder to save Rome from his ravages.

The opera's heroine, Odabella, sung with a strained and often unattractive edginess by the debutante Spanish soprano Saioa Hernández, leads the conspiracy with patriotic fervor. In this production, she unfurls the Italian tricolor flag over Attila's corpse after killing him. Her confused amour, Foresto, tries to help with an overlapping conspiracy after intemperately misinterpreting her true intentions toward Attila, and his fecklessness was captured well by the less-than-stellar tenor Fabio Sartori. Ildar Abdrazakov radiated a conqueror's confidence in the title role, a challenging bass-baritone part. He displayed a gorgeous legato, but he sounded a bit muddy in the

lower register. George Petean did well in the secondary, but more Verdian, baritone role of Ezio, the Roman general who tries to cut a deal with Attila but is upbraided by him for his lack of honor. The Scala music director Riccardo Chailly's exploration of the rarities of Italian repertoire has extended to early Verdi works even less commonly performed than *Attila*, as well as to curatorial presentations of earlier scores from more familiar works. Under his baton and attentive reading of the score, this production is a fine continuation of that trend.

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