

Elements of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in Verdi's *Don Carlo*

The story of Oedipus has inspired an impressive number of operatic composers. Purcell (1692), Rossini (1817), Mendelssohn (1845), Leoncavallo (1920), Stravinski (1927), Enescu (1936), Partch (1951), Orff (1959) Rihm (1986-87), and Anderson (2014), all have composed music based, more or less directly, on Sophocles' plays about this mythical hero. While the opera that stands at the center of my paper, Verdi's *Don Carlo* (1867), does not overtly advertise its connection to Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, I shall argue that it nevertheless borrows two important elements of its plot from this ancient tragedy.

The story of Verdi's *Don Carlo* is based mainly on Schiller's tragedy by the same name (1787), which in turn dramatizes material taken from a fictionalized account of events at the Spanish court in the sixteenth century written by the Abbé de Saint-Réal (1672). It is a historical fact that the French princess Elizabeth of Valois was briefly betrothed to Don Carlos, the son of King Philip II of Spain, before the king decided to marry her himself instead. (At the time, King Philip was in his early thirties, while Don Carlos and Elizabeth were both fourteen.) But there is no evidence for the romantic attraction between the two young people that forms the tragic premise of the opera. Renowned Verdi scholar Julian Budden describes the resulting triangle as "the classic Oedipal situation" (1981:10), and this label is confirmed by Elizabeth's being referred to as Carlos' "mother" throughout the opera, when, strictly speaking, she is merely his step-mother (II.1.3, II.2.4, III.1.3, III.2.1, V.2).

In his interpretation of the opera, however, Budden never mentions Sophocles. Instead he seeks the model for the constellation of characters in the Old Testament, equating King Philip with King Saul, the friendship between his son Don Carlo and the free-thinking Marquis of Posa with that between Saul's son Jonathan and the future King David, and the Grand Inquisitor with

the prophet Samuel (1981: 10, 12, 124). A brief summary of the opera's plot and the biblical tale respectively will make clear that this equation is problematic, not only because of its omission of the central love triangle, but also because Verdi's Grand Inquisitor has little in common with the biblical prophet Samuel. Rather, the Grand Inquisitor bears a striking resemblance to the character of Teiresias in *Oedipus the King*:

- Both are extremely old;
- Both are blind;
- Both appear at a summons from the king (Oedipus, Philip) and engage in a prolonged dispute with him;
- Both served as advisers already to the previous king (Laius, Charles V);
- Both point out the contrast between the current king's and his father's attitude to themselves;
- Both turn the king's inquiry about a person whom he perceives as a threat (Laius' murderer, Carlos) into an accusation of somebody to whom he feels close (Oedipus himself, the Marquis of Posa);
- Both are called by the angered king insulting terms that belittle their religious authority (μάγον... ἀγύρτην, "frate").

As a result, listening to the scene between Philip and the Grand Inquisitor with the clash between Oedipus and Teiresias at the back of our minds deepens our understanding of the opera. But the inverse is also true. Once we have recognized the Grand Inquisitor as the dramatic progeny of the prophet Teiresias, we can use the sinuously creeping music with which Verdi accompanies his entrance to remind ourselves that Teiresias's blindness and otherworldly power would have been visibly manifest to the ancient spectator before (and in addition to) it was

spoken of verbally. Similarly, Verdi's setting of the clash between the head of state and the head of religion in the rare form of a duo sung by two basses lends the scene a special gravity and emotional power. Finally, the section in which he has Philip and the Grand Inquisitor take turns singing short musical phrases of similar length and rhythm, but each a half-step higher than the last, achieves a similar effect of dogged insistence and growing tension between the antagonists as emerges from the stichomythia between Oedipus and Teiresias. A four-minute clip from the opera, accompanied by a handout showing an excerpt of the score as well as the text of the corresponding passage from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* both in the original and in translation will illustrate these effects.

Bibliography

Budden, J. *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. 3, New York 1981.