A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AUDIO RECORDINGS OF
GIUSEPPE VERDI’S OVERTURE TO LA FORZA DEL DESTINO
A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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BY
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Giuseppe Verdi’s opera *La forza del destino* was premiered in St. Petersburg, Russia, on November 10, 1862. In 1868, Verdi agreed to a new production of the opera at La Scala Opera House in Milan. For this production, he replaced the original preludio with a full-scale overture that is comprised of some of the most memorable tunes. Since its initial performance, the overture has become extremely popular as a stand-alone concert piece. Many famous conductors have recorded this overture. The following paper will explore four specific recordings by prestigious conductors and orchestras. The four recordings that have been analyzed are of Arturo Toscanini conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra (1949), Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic (1975), Riccardo Muti conducting the Orchestra Filarmonica della Scala (1995), and James Levine conducting the London Symphony Orchestra (1977). In addition to the audio recordings, a video recording of a production from La Scala in 1978 with conductor Giuseppe Patané was used to determine if the overture is performed any differently as part of the opera. Additionally, the video recording was used to determine where the different themes in the overture came from in the opera.

In order to simplify the discussion of the various recordings, I have divided the overture into sixteen different sections. The sections are based on a division of the major themes or where tempo changes occur. Section one is comprised of measures 1 through 8. The tempo marking is

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“Allegro.” Here, the brass and bassoons play three half notes of the note E. The three notes are then repeated. These three notes are used to signify fate or, more accurately, destiny.

Example 1: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 1-8

Section two is comprised of measures 9 through 42. The tempo in this section is marked “Allegro agitato e presto.” This section is comprised of a sixteenth-note string motive. This motive continues to come back throughout the overture, often as an ostinato.
Example 2: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 9-14

Section three is set as measures 43 through 50. This section is a direct restatement of section one. The tempo is marked as “I. Tempo.”

Section four is comprised of measures 51 through 67. The tempo marking for this section is “Andantino.” This section is characterized by the flute, oboe, and clarinet unison lyrical melody with interjections from the first violins playing the sixteenth-note motive from section two. The music in this section is derived from the duet sung by Don Carlo and Don Álvaro in the last act of the opera. This duet leads to the characters’ final duel, “Col sangue sol cancellasi.”
Section five takes place from measure 68 through 82. This section begins with an eight-measure lyrical melodic motive in octaves played by the violins, with interruptions in the fourth measure and eighth measure from the low strings and winds of the sixteenth-note motive. Starting in measure 76, or the ninth bar of the section, more instruments begin to join the melodic motive with the low strings and winds now playing the sixteenth-note motive as an ostinato. This section remains piano until the last three measures where it grows to forte at the
downbeat of section six. The quarter-note theme in this section is derived from Leonora’s aria in the second act where she is praying to find peace.

Example 4: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 68-73

Section five leads into section six without pause. The next section is comprised of measures 83 through 114. The tempo of this section is marked “Presto come prima.” The theme of this section is the sixteenth-note theme from section two. The opening dynamic of the section is forte and at measure 95 the dynamic raises to fortissimo. The energy of this section is maintained from the beginning to the end.
Example 5: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 83-88

Presto come prima
Section seven begins at measure 115 and continues through 121. “Andante come prima” is the tempo marking of this section. The main theme is the lyrical theme played by the flute, oboe, and clarinet in section four. However, this time, each instrument states one measure of the theme at separate times. The clarinet begins, followed by the oboe, and then concluding with the flute, which plays the theme with a poco allargando. This section, dynamically set at piano dolce, seems to be a true reflection or remembrance of section four.

Example 6: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 115-121

Section eight is measure 122 through 140. The tempo here is marked as “Allegro brillante.” The primary voice in this section is a lyrical clarinet solo accompanied by two harps playing triplets underneath, as well as celli emphasizing the chord changes. In measure 130 of this section, the flute and bassoon join in to support the clarinet melody. A few measures later,
the horns also join. This section leads straight into section nine. The clarinet melody in this section is derived from the duet “Se voi scacciate questa pentita,” which is sung between Leonora and Padre Guariano. Material from this duet continues throughout the next two sections.

Example 7: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 122-124

Section nine takes place from measure 141 through 165. This section is characterized by a sixteenth-note melody in the strings with a fanfare-style response in the brass. In measure 147, the seventh measure of this section, the first and second violins have a semi-contrapuntal melody, with the viola, cello, and bass playing eighth-note scales underneath. At measure 151, the brass section joins in leading the section to a strong finish, transitioning immediately to section ten.
Section ten is comprised of measure 166 through 179. This section contains a reverent brass chorale. At the end of each phrase, the strings interrupt the chorale with furious sixteenth notes. In this section, which still derives its material from Leonora’s and Padre Guardiano’s duet, the brass chorale is meant to represent a Padre Guardiano reciting a prayer, where the string interruptions are to represent the Leonora’s plea.
Example 9: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 166-172

Section eleven begins at measure 180 and proceeds through measure 197. Here the dynamic drops to pianissimo. This section is characterized by the sixteenth-note theme from section two. Here, however, the theme is repeated. More voices join in measure 189 with a massive three-measure crescendo to forte in 192, where the dynamic remains until the end of the section.
Example 10: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 164-172
Section twelve is from measure 198 through 203. The tempo indication here is “ritard grandioso.” The texture involves a soaring melody in the upper woodwinds and trumpets, with sustained chords supported by the rest of the orchestra. This is a major climax of the overture. Verdi signifies the importance of this section by adding the crash cymbal. This is the first time it is used in the piece.

Example 11: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 195-200
In section thirteen, which takes place from measure 204 through 222, a new theme is introduced. This theme is characterized by the violin triplet melody that is played pianissimo. Even though Verdi presents a new theme here, the bassoon, viola, and cello carry on with the sixteenth-note motive from section two as an ostinato.

Example 12: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 201-205
Section fourteen takes place from measure 223 through 230. This section is fortissimo and is characterized by the brass entering with a new theme. Underneath the brass, the low strings and low woodwinds continue with the sixteenth ostinato.

Example 13: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 222-226
Section fifteen happens in measure 231 through 238. This section has a similar feel to section thirteen, but instead of triplets, the melody is in sixteenth notes. In support of the sixteenth notes, the winds are playing lyrical quarter notes.

Example 14: Overture to *La forza del destino*, mm. 231-233

Section sixteen, the final section of the piece, takes place from measure 239 through 261. The tempo marking at the beginning of this section is “Piu animato.” The main theme of this section is similar to that introduced in section fourteen. The section is characterized by loud, syncopated chords. With the exception of two places, measure 243 and 252, where the music drops to softer dynamics suddenly this final section remains loud to the very end.
Example 15: Overture to La forza del destino, mm. 237-240
The primary interpretive element that I explored was tempo. I listened to each recording multiple times with a metronome. I used the “tap” feature on my metronome to determine the tempi that each conductor used throughout each section. Once I discovered this information, I compiled the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Toscanini</th>
<th>Karajan</th>
<th>Muti</th>
<th>Levine</th>
<th>Patané</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 1 mm. 1 - 8</td>
<td>J = 120</td>
<td>J = 70</td>
<td>J = 126</td>
<td>J = 118</td>
<td>J = 110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 2 mm. 9 - 24</td>
<td>J = 96</td>
<td>J = 80</td>
<td>J = 88</td>
<td>J = 90</td>
<td>J = 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 3 mm. 43 - 50</td>
<td>J = 120</td>
<td>J = 70</td>
<td>J = 119</td>
<td>J = 120</td>
<td>J = 98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 4 mm. 51 - 67</td>
<td>♩ = 86, rubato rit. (66)</td>
<td>♩ = 75, slight rubato</td>
<td>♩ = 80, ww rubato, strict vln</td>
<td>♩ = 86</td>
<td>♩ = 74, rubato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 5 mm. 68 - 82</td>
<td>♩ = 70 (68-74)</td>
<td>♩ = 50 (68-74)</td>
<td>♩ = 60, molto rubato (68-74)</td>
<td>♩ = 60, rubato (68-74)</td>
<td>♩ = 56, molto rubato (68-74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 6 mm. 83 - 114</td>
<td>J = 92</td>
<td>J = 94</td>
<td>J = 96</td>
<td>J = 94</td>
<td>J = 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 7 mm. 115 - 121</td>
<td>♩ = 79</td>
<td>♩ = 74</td>
<td>♩ = 58, molto rubato</td>
<td>♩ = 60</td>
<td>♩ = 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 8 mm. 122 - 140</td>
<td>J = 148</td>
<td>J = 133, poco rubato</td>
<td>J = 136</td>
<td>J = 138</td>
<td>J = 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 9 mm. 141 - 165</td>
<td>J = 148</td>
<td>J = 136 molto dim. (165)</td>
<td>J = 132 (141-150)</td>
<td>J = 141 (151-165)</td>
<td>J = 141</td>
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<tr>
<td>Section 10 mm. 166 - 179</td>
<td>J = 132</td>
<td>J = 121</td>
<td>J = 132</td>
<td>J = 127</td>
<td>J = 133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 11 mm. 180 - 197</td>
<td>J = 155 (180-191) accel. (192-195)</td>
<td>J = 143</td>
<td>J = 148</td>
<td>J = 147</td>
<td>J = 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 12 mm. 198 - 203</td>
<td>J = 90 (198-201)</td>
<td>J = 100 (198-201)</td>
<td>J = 85 (198-201)</td>
<td>J = 79 (198-201)</td>
<td>J = 93 (198-201)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Section 13 mm. 204 - 222</td>
<td>J = 173</td>
<td>J = 150</td>
<td>J = 150</td>
<td>J = 164</td>
<td>J = 150</td>
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<td>Section 14 mm. 223 - 230</td>
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<td>J = 156</td>
<td>J = 165</td>
<td>J = 160</td>
<td>J = 150</td>
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<td>Section 15 mm. 231 - 238</td>
<td>J = 167</td>
<td>J = 156</td>
<td>J = 155</td>
<td>J = 160</td>
<td>J = 150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Section 16 mm. 239 - 261</td>
<td>J = 182</td>
<td>J = 156</td>
<td>J = 160</td>
<td>J = 177</td>
<td>J = 153</td>
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</table>
After the information was compiled, I compared how each conductor interpreted each section. In section one, all of the conductors went about the same tempo except Karajan. Karajan took the opening chords only about half as fast as the other conductors. This slow tempo sets a different mood for the entire piece. It possibly provides a stronger feeling of fate, but the slower tempo causes the chords to lose some of the power of the opening. Section three mirrored section one in all of the recordings. Each conductor set approximately the same tempo in section four, but their level of rubato varied. Levine used no rubato, Karajan only used a little bit of rubato, and Patané a little more. Muti used quite a bit of rubato during the woodwind melody, but kept the violin entrances in strict time. Toscanini allowed the tempo to push and pull the most compared to other recordings. The issue of rubato carried over into section five. Toscanini and Karajan added no vibrato, while Levine added some and Muti and Patané used molto vibrato. In general, the conductors either stayed the same tempo or sped up slightly at measure 75. However, Toscanini slowed down at measure 75. Everyone added a ritard at measure 82, where one is not marked. All the conductors, with the exception of Patané, went about the same tempo in section six. Patané went 10 bpm slower than the slowest of the other four. When listening to the recordings simultaneously, this tempo variance is easily heard, but does not effect the overall feeling of the piece. In section seven, the tempi cover a wide range. Muti conducts the slowest tempo with the eighth note equaling 58 bpm, and the variance among the conductors increases to Toscanini conducting the eighth note at 79 bpm. It should also be observed that both of these men are prominent Italian conductors, making the tempo variation interesting. One might think Italians, for whom Verdi is a national figure, would have a similar interpretation of the piece. Section seven proves this to be untrue. Again in section eight, all of the conductors select about the same tempo. Karajan, however, allows for some rubato throughout this section. Allowing for
rubato is difficult here because the harp has constant eighth-note triplets throughout this section. The only variation that is important to note in section nine is the molto diminuendo that Karajan adds in measure 165. This is contrary to what is printed in the part; Verdi indicates a crescendo throughout this section. The only difference that should be noted in section eleven is that Toscanini adds an accelerando starting in measure 192 that leads to the molto ritard in measure 198. This accelerando causes a more abrupt ritard when it appears. An important interpretive tradition that each conductor added was the subito piu mosso in measures 202 and 203. From sections thirteen through fifteen, all of the tempi are relatively similar and constant. Section sixteen is where the piu mosso is printed. Most conductors only go a little bit faster, but Toscanini increases his tempo drastically. This came as quite a shock to me as I listened to the recording.

My interpretive choices for this piece were primarily based on three factors. The first factor was that I wanted to find smooth tempo transitions from section to another. The second factor that determined my interpretation was the ability of the orchestra. I could only take certain sections at certain tempi because of how fast the string section could play. Finally, I consulted the recordings discussed in order to determine what, if anything, is traditionally done and to determine if any inspiration could be obtained from the decisions made by the master conductors.

I set my tempo for section one so that the quarter note equaled 120 bpm. My interpretive goal for this section was for it to sound like destiny was knocking on a door. I decided that this tempo allowed for this effect to truly come through in the interpretation. Also, this is approximately the tempo in all of the recordings, except for the Karajan recording. In section two, my tempo was dotted quarter note equals 69 bpm. This tempo is slower than I would truly
want to go, but the technical ability of the orchestra dictated that tempo. However, 69 bpm is still an effective tempo because it still encourages the forward drive that is necessary in this section. I interpreted section three as being exactly like section one; therefore, I set the tempo to equal 120 bpm. My interpretation of section four required a slower tempo: the eighth note now equals 72 bpm. My goal in this section was to add some slight rubato and lift at the end of each woodwind line. The Muti recording influenced my choice for rubato here. Adding rubato allows for a more singing quality to the section, not unlike how the soloist would perform the corresponding aria later in the opera. Section five was established as quarter note equaling 50 bpm. When the ostinato begins in measure 75, I quickened the tempo so that the quarter note equals 60 bpm. The Muti recording, once again, effected my decision to start one tempo and then speed up at measure 75. The tempo I chose for section six is the dotted quarter note equaling 94 bpm. The majority of the recordings reflected this tempo, so it seemed to be the “traditional” tempo of the section. In section seven, I began the clarinet statement at the tempo from section four, which is eighth note equaling 72 bpm, but I then immediately began to slow the tempo down. This interpretation allows for a feeling of relaxation after the intensity of section six. It also allows this section to seem like a true reflection of section four. The Muti and Levine recordings had an effect on my interpretive choice here. Their recordings have the reflective quality I was trying to achieve. The tempo I chose for section eight was quarter note equals 138 bpm. This tempo allowed the clarinet to comfortably play the lyrical melody. Although some of the recordings allowed for rubato in this section, I insisted we keep strict time. Due to the harp’s triplet ostinato underneath the solo, rubato would make this section extremely difficult. By the time section nine begins, the tempo of my performance had dropped off slightly to the quarter note equaling 132 bpm. The brass chorale at section ten slows again to the quarter note equaling 121 bpm. I
interpreted this section a little slower because of the prayerfulness it represents. Additionally, all of the recordings studied slow slightly in this section, leading me to believe it is tradition. However, in section eleven I resumed the faster tempo, increasing it to the quarter note at 135 bpm. In my interpretation of this piece, I began to ritard in measure 196, so that measure 197 is at a tempo where the quarter note equals 120 bpm. There were two reasons for this interpretive choice. First, slowing down here smoothly set up section twelve. Second, because of the ability level of some of the violins, slowing down allowed them to feel more comfortable with the descending sixteenth notes. In section twelve, my tempo began with the quarter note equaling 114 bpm. At measure 202, I sped up so that the quarter note now equalled 154 bpm. As is evident by the recordings studied here, this subito tempo change at measure 202 is a tradition that influenced my interpretation. In section thirteen, the fastest I allowed was the quarter note at 144 bpm. This interpretive choice was based on the technique of the section. The triplet motive that the violins have is very challenging and in order to make the section more obtainable, I did not go too fast. With the exception of Toscanini, none of the recordings went much faster than this tempo. I attempted to keep the tempo constant with the quarter note equaling 144 bpm throughout sections fourteen and fifteen. The tempo slightly fluctuated, but overall it stayed consistent. At section sixteen, I decided to pick the tempo up to where the quarter note equals 153 bpm. With the exception of a slight push at the end, this tempo was constant throughout the last section.

Audio and video recordings are extremely valuable tools for a young conductor learning a piece for the first time. Especially in the genre of opera, there are many traditions that are done that are not printed in the score. Because of this, one must learn by listening to previous interpreters. Although they are an important tool, recordings must be used appropriately. One
should be conscious of listening to a recording too much because then the individual’s interpretation will most likely be extremely similar as said recording. In this case presented here, I found that by studying these recordings, I was able to have a better grasp on the traditions of Verdi’s operas and overtures. Although I did consult recordings before conducting Giuseppe Verdi’s Overture to *La forza del destino*, I can confidently say that the performance I presented was uniquely my own.
Bibliography


