

## The Role of Amelia in Giuseppe Verdi's "Un ballo in maschera" – Vocality and Technical-interpretative Coordinates

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**Abstract:** *Like all of Verdi's mature works, the opera "Un ballo in maschera" demonstrates notable progress in both vocal and orchestral writing. In terms of the vocality of the characters, Verdi creates remarkable solo roles, adapted to the various dramaturgical requirements. The role of Amelia is a key character, being assigned an extensive vocal discourse. Her vocality reflects a noticeable difference from the Verdian patterns used in the construction of female roles, up to "Il Trovatore". The suppression of the well-known "cabaletta", the abandonment of the demonstrations of vocal virtuosity and the intensification of the vocal writing in the middle register, offer a plus of uniqueness to this role. Thus, a new vocal pattern is materialized among the female characters representative in Giuseppe Verdi's work, leaving behind the vocal portraits of the heroines inspired from the belcanto singing "tradition". In this study we will analyze from a structural and interpretive point of view the main solo moments of the role.*

Key-words: *Amelia, soprano, vocality, interpretative coordinates*

### 1. Introduction

The vocal discourse intended for Amelia outlines one of the most difficult vocal types in Verdi's female repertoire. Not by chance, the great interpreters who gave life to this role during the 20th century are not very many, considering all the technical, interpretative and psychological requirements imposed.

With a vocality predominantly oriented towards the middle register, according to the skills of soprano Marie-Cornélie Falcon, Verdi followed Gustav Auber's dramaturgical structure and placed numerous orchestral moments

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preceding Amelia's arias, while Somma articulated the libretto so that the whole mood of protagonists to be able to unfold in front of the viewer. For a better perception of the vocality originally thought by Auber, we present the following ideas belonging to Berton Coffin, baritone and vocal pedagogue: "Marie Falcon, whose name still is used to describe a particular type of dramatic soprano voice. I detect these dramatic stories behind the explanation of the *clair* (clear) and *sombre* (dark) timbres in relationship to the structure of the throat and to vocal registers, and in the extent to which they have affected the history of the development of the art of teaching singing." (Coffin 2002, 19-20).

Amelia's psychological profile shows nobility, both in relation to the other characters and in the management of her own emotions. In this sense, the following ideas are relevant: "Yet women who do not seduce or betray, women who are themselves seduced, are also at risk. This can be true whether they struggle against infatuation, like Amelia in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*." (Kerman 2006, 22).

## **2. The role of Amelia - general aspects of vocality**

The ample orchestral accompaniment requires an important voice, carefully handled both in the low register (from the sound of A flat) and in the upper register (the sounds B2 flat-B2-C3 being highlighted at moments of maximum intensity). Another important aspect in approaching this role is the vocal malleability, the ease in achieving a sustained *legato*, despite the countless dynamic, agogical indications and signs of expression that Verdi uses to potentiate various inner states. In relation to Amelia's vocal performance, we present the following observations: "Her vocal part is exceptionally hard, benefiting by heavier voices of dramatic sopranos, such as Zinka Milanov and Maria Callas, Martina Arroyo and even Birgit Nilsson." (Lederer 2014, 179).

In the trio in Act I ("Della citta all'ocaso"), Ulrica's dark tones and rapidly shifting harmonies contrast with Amelia's stretched tense phrases. At such a time, we understand why the role of Amelia is often attributed to a dramatic soprano rather than a lirico spinto soprano. Thus, it is appropriate to present the following definition: "The dramatic soprano instrument is closer in character to the dramatic mezzo than to the light soprano; registration events reflect these relationships. Vocal classification must take into account the location of pivotal points, without, however, relying solely on them." (Miller 1986, 134).

Between the measures 212-217 of the mentioned trio, Amelia's voice must "pass" over the orchestral accompaniment, respecting the dynamics of the musical phrases. At the same time, the homogenization of the two characters gives more expressiveness, so that the vocal timbre of each of the performers contributes to the creation of a soundscape.

In the trio from Act II, the soprano moves from fragmented singing to *sottovoce*, so that later she can create a descending melodic bow, *staccato-legato*. Starting from the sound D1, it is imperative that the performer possesses a deep low register, to be able to penetrate over the orchestra and to reproduce justly the agitated character. In other ensemble moments, also, the sonority of the low register is very important because Amelia has to stand out from the male voices of the other protagonists. At the same time, a good articulation of words contributes to achieving an expressive effect. We have in mind the fact that the literary text is dense and abounds in consonants: "Odi tu come sonano cupi/Per quest'aura gli accenti di morte" ("Do you hate how dark they sound / In this air the accents of death"). Thus, taking care of an efficient articulation and pronunciation is one of the priorities. These observations do not only apply to the trio in Act II, but to all situations within the score that involve a large flow of literary text, in the middle or low register.



Fig.1. Trio act II, measures 90-93

Another important aspect is the approach of the high register. At this stage of Verdi's creation, the "traditional" bel canto style is augmented by dramatic accents. The graceful phrases, the endless cantilenas that ennobled the musical discourse, are gradually transformed into sung declamation, or alternated with moments in which the dramatic action takes precedence at the expense of a "beautiful" sonority. In such moments, the vocal color, the utterance, and the assumption of the text from an interpretive point of view contribute to the realization of a whole artistic act.

### 3. The construction of the vocal discourse – technical-interpretive landmarks

Amelia has fallen in love with Riccardo, the governor of her province, whose close friend and chief assistant is her husband. A woman of honor and honesty who desperately faces her passion. Ulrica, the soothsayer, advised her to gather some magic herbs at midnight from the place near the gallows, because they would cure her of his illicit love. In this scene from Act II of the opera, a lonely field at the foot of a crumbling hill is shown, where two gallows are dimly perceived in the dim moonlight - a sinister, almost surreal landscape. Veiled and wrapped in a large black cape, Amelia slowly enters the stage during the prelude and kneels in prayer. After this unsettling moment, she stands up and looks around in fear and disgust. This first appearance of Amelia (the recitative “Ecco l'orrido campo”) is a perfect example of the playwright Verdi and must be performed and performed with all the vocal and theatrical resources of the interpreter. As mentioned before, the role of Amelia requires a dramatic voice or a sonorous spinto voice and a performer of great intensity and versatility.

The aria itself has a tristrophic form, with recitative and conclusion. In the harmonic plane, we noted the valorization of the tonal system, thus, the recitative passes through the following harmonic pillars: D minor – A minor – Eb minor. The first and second sections capitalize on the tonality of F minor and the transition begins on an A pedal. The last section begins in A major, then modulates to D minor and G# minor and the conclusion brings the tonality of F major, quickly modulates to A major and returns to F major. The aria consists of a recitative and a beautiful cantilene alternating with extremely dramatic declamatory pages. The recitative “Ecco l'orrido campo” is an *Allegro Agitato*, with permissions made, of course, for several variations of tempo closely related to the fluctuations of Amelia's emotions. The first sentence of the recitative betrays a feeling of nervousness and must be expressed in singing, fear and repulsion of the character. In terms of vocality, the performer must consider precise attacks on the sounds that constitute the first phrase of the recitative.

The image shows a musical score for Amelia's recitative. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked **ALL<sup>o</sup> AGITATO** in a red box. The vocal line begins with the lyrics: "Ecco l'orrido campo ove s'accoppia al delitto la". The piano accompaniment is marked **Recit<sup>o</sup> ALL<sup>o</sup> AGITATO**.

Fig. 2. Recitative "Ecco l'orrido campo", measures 1-4

The beginning of the aria unfolds in tempo *andante* ( $\text{♩} = 72$ , *con espressione*) emphasizing the ailing character of Amelia. The first three phrases are interpreted evenly, *a tempo*, carefully observing the exact rhythm of the triolets, inserting the *crescendo-decrescendo* effect in the middle of each phrase.

The image shows a musical score for Amelia's aria. It consists of a vocal line. The tempo is marked **ANDANTE** with a quarter note equal to 72 ( $\text{♩} = 72$ ). The score includes several dynamic markings: *con espress.*, *PP smorz.*, and *con dolore*. The lyrics are: "Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa... sa come avrò di mia mano quell'erba, e che dentro la mente convulsa quell'eterrea sembianza morrà:..... che ti resta, perduto l'amor... che ti resta, che ti resta, mio povero cor!". The score features various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and fermatas.

Fig. 3. Aria "Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa", measures 40-57

By tradition, between measures 47-50 is achieved an *allargando* on the words “quell'eterea”, followed by a *ritardando* and *morendo* on the word “morra”. In measure 49 there is an intense but lyrical crescendo. A deep breath after “l'amor” prepares the moment sustained by great emotion on the words “che ti resta”, especially in the high register. The short breath after the repetition of the words “ti resta”, the second time and the completion of the phrase expressively, *piano*, to which is added a long *fermata*, very moving on the word “povero”, emphasizes the affection of the character.

Up to this point in the aria, the voice has served a sensitive character, dominated by lyrical accents. The next page, although in the same *tempo*, induces a tense character, due to its writing. The “broken” phrases, sung untimely preferably in *mezzoforte*, reveal uncertainty, inner conflicts, and through the words “Su, coraggio” reveal a transition to a much more dramatic expression. The words “Non tradirmi”, with a *tenuto* on the first two notes, already possess a more thorny character, and Amelia's plea to her own heart remains firm despite a diminuendo. An acceleration on “o finisci di battere e muor” precedes a A flat 2 accented on “t'annienta”. An ample sonorosity is required on all the sounds that form the words mentioned before. The end of the sentence remains intense and the insertion of a breath after each “t'annienta” could increase the dramatic vigor of the music. To give importance to the sounds in the lower register, the performer must look for a timbral color similar to the mezzo-soprano. The sounds B and C in the lower register will be very well integrated into the context if they are sung with naturalness, without accents and without an ingolate emission, adding a fair articulation of the words.

Fig. 4. Aria “Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa”, measures 68-72

The return to the initial *tempo* of the aria highlights the new solemn character and gives more expressiveness to Amelia's prayer. This section of the aria begins in *mezzopiano*, reaching a safe *mezzoforte* on the note C3 natural (measures 108-109). The sounds G2-A2-B2 flat are strong, but their rendering will be performed without shrillness, so that the sound C3 has an expansive rather than tense character. It is recommended to use one breath after the word "Miserere" and another after the words "povero cor", which are expressed in *forte*. The word "Miserere" will be vibrant and emotional if the vowels /i/ and /e/ are rendered just from the point of articulation. "Miserere" that precedes the final cadenza can be performed in a very settled tempo. Regarding the execution of the final cadenza, for better sonorous fluidity and greater expressiveness, the sound Bb2 can be linked to the previous C1. After the sound D1 flat a breath is suggested, allowing the soprano to reach the end of the cadence, well supporting the literary text and giving it sonority. The last words are, of course, pronounced with depth, capitalizing on the rhythmic formulas.



Fig. 5. Aria "Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa", measures, final cadenza, measure 114

Amelia's next solo moment is represented by the aria "Morro, ma prima in grazia". This impressive aria requires excellent vocal resources. Although it reveals a great sophistication and intimacy, it can also offer great satisfaction if the performer organizes his text and vocal phrases respecting the justified changes of color, dynamics and tempo. Amelia, threatened with death by her outraged husband, kneels at his feet and pleads for one last favor. She will accept death if she can embrace her son one last time. This aria is a masterpiece that offers the performer two challenges: first, to lead the vocal discourse with a clear sonority that never rises above the mezzo forte shade until the last cadence. In other words, the sound must be at the same time intense, feminine, overflowing with sensitivity, convincing, and often reproduce the effect of a sigh.

The image displays a musical score for the aria "Morro, ma prima in grazia". It consists of three systems of music. The first system shows the piano introduction with a tempo marking of *ANDANTE* and a metronome marking of  $\text{♩} = 48$ . The piano part features a melodic line with two red boxes highlighting specific phrases. The second system includes the vocal entry, marked *con dolore* and *pp allarg.*, with the lyrics "Morro, ma prima in gra - - zia". The piano accompaniment is marked *a piacere* and *p*. The third system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "deh! mi consen.ti al - me - - no l'u - ni.co fi.glio mi - .o,l'unico figlio". The piano part continues with a purple box highlighting a section. Various musical notations such as *espress.*, *pppp*, and triplets are present throughout the score.

Fig. 6. Aria "Morro, ma prima in grazia", measures 1-11

The aria is stated by the *Andante* indication, a procedure that contributes to the meditative-reflexive character of the musical score. It is distinguished by the bistrophic form and the monothematic construction being capitalized by the evolution of the melody. From a harmonic point of view, the basic tonality is Eb minor and along the way we encounter small chromatic inflections. A cello solo stands out from within the orchestra, which will accompany Amelia's vocal speech throughout the aria. We notice it three measures before Amelia's entrance; after an overwhelming silence, she utters a single word, "Morro," thus giving up her life. The intention behind this short thrown word is that of withdrawal, reinforcing the elegiac character initiated by the cello. Later, the voice takes long *legato* phrases,



replacing the sound of the cello, singing long vowels in words such as "grazia", "meno". In the following measures, the rhythm and its variations suggest, on the one hand, the urgency of the plea and, on the other hand, through the use of triplets, great tenderness - these triplets, to be expressive, require both vocal legato and flexibility, softness.

Fig. 7. Aria "Morro, ma prima in grazia" measures 24-29

A long crescendo begins with "or che l'estrema" developed to *mezzoforte* on the word "fugaci". Thus the ephemerality of its existence is emphasized – the highlight on the word "fugaci" is indicated. A breath can be inserted and is often taken before the last note of measure 26 (the "fu-" syllable of the word "fugaci"), allowing for an ascending scale *crescendo* and *ritardando*, a *fermata* on the sound A flat 2 (the "-ci" syllable), and a *morendo* on the sound of A natural 1. The silence at the end of measure 27 can also be extended to suggest Amelia's reluctance to say the next painful phrase, "spenta per man del padre," played with restraint, in *piano*. There is still a *diminuendo* on "la man ei stendera". But now Amelia's pain

deepens at the thought that she will close her eyes and her son will never see her again. The word “stendera” should be carried next to the expression “su gl'occhi” with a sudden, almost violent intensity. Accents on the following notes create the effect of sobs, but their execution must be done with refinement and delicacy.

The effect is repeated in measure 37, the grand orchestral crescendo introducing the voice in fortissimo on F flat 2, the following sounds being played with force and strong accents. The great solo cadence at the end of the aria is *rubato*. The vocal discourse is marked by an ascending leap of a perfect fifth in measure 38, in which we find another example of the utility of the vowel /u/. C flat 3 in measure 39 will be easier to execute so as to create a climax, if, in the previous measure, the two short phrases “che mai” and “piu vedra” are approached in a reduced tone - *piano*, highlighting once more the character's maternal pain. There should not be any actual “attack” on the sound of C flat 3 (measure 39), but it should be premeditated by an optimal position of the larynx, and implicitly its preparation by ample breathing. The descending sounds of the cadence must be balanced in terms of position to achieve an effect of sound homogeneity. Perhaps in this last page of the aria “Morro, ma prima in grazia” lies the essence of this complex role.

The image displays a musical score for the aria "Morro, ma prima in grazia", measures 37-40. The score is in G-flat major (three flats) and 4/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. Measure 37 shows the vocal line starting with "- drà," followed by "che mai più, mai più, che mai più vedrà!" which is highlighted with a red box. The piano accompaniment in measure 37 is marked "p" and "ff". Measure 38 shows the vocal line with "ah!..... mai più ve.drà!" highlighted with a red box. The piano accompaniment in measure 38 is marked "p" and "ppp". Measure 39 is marked "Adagio" and "allarg.". Measure 40 is marked "ppp".

Fig. 8. Aria “Morro, ma prima in grazia”, measures 37-40

#### 4. The role of Amelia in reference interpretations

We must remind the expressive dynamics, the use of the legate for expressive purposes, the consistency that "they knew how to say" of Anita Cerquetti, Antonietta Stella, of the now worn Zinka Milanov whom was capable of expressing with all the necessary force the horror of the nocturnal setting and the desperate courage of the protagonist. She was the model of the Verdian soprano between the end of the thirties and the beginning of the fifties from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the particular features of Zinka Milanov's vocal was the use of an unique *mezzavoce* - an essential aspect of Verdian's writing. In this sense, we present the following testimonies: "I always tried to put my piano, my mezza voce, my legato in all my parts. I don't believe it can be done well without it." (Hines 1982, 166).

We must remember also the languor of a Margaret Price - if you listen to the Solti recording again. Of course, we must not forget Birgit Nilsson's Amelia, who stands out for her incisiveness and dramatic accuracy. On the other hand, there was also Sena Jurinac. She would not have had, especially in 1950, the true and authentic voice of the dramatic Verdi soprano, the accent would not have been irresistible and very personal even if the recitative was made in a harder manner. But there is also her beautiful German style, the fragile woman, frightened and desperate in respect of the song, the diction always sculpted and never exaggerated, the sound always soft, flexible. These things are unrepeatable and fear very few comparisons. All of these interpretations seem irreplaceable souvenirs.

#### 5. Conclusions

In the vocal approach to the role of Amelia, the intensity of feelings is transmitted through the vocal color, its clarity and expressiveness. Emotional participation, "living" the character is imperative. In the same way, the purity of the emission and the subtlety of the reproduction of the different nuances can ensure the success of a good interpretation. At the same time, an extremely important technical detail in interpretation is breathing. The lack of cursiveness, of fluency in execution, diminishes the beauty of the interpretation, and we have to consider the stylistic requirements of Italian romanticism, which definitely imposes a legato and a vocal consistency. The vision and conception of a role, aria, or any other vocal piece will undoubtedly speak for itself, if it is genuine.

The interpretation, provided it does not alter what is written in the text and the musical score, can be carried out with freedom, fantasy and originality. To support these conclusive ideas, the following observations are important “One of the most essential features for a successful singing performance is a credible portrayal of the emotional stance required by the respective piece. Although technical prowess and beauty of the voice are obviously decisive factors in a singer's career, they are rarely sufficient to move the audience to tears-or to standing ovations.” (Scherer 1995, 243). Undoubtedly, the balance between fidelity to the score and the individual value offered to the performance is the prerogative of great singers. This female role, representative of Giuseppe Verdi's mature work, is a real touchstone for the soprano voice. Axel Körner states the following ideas: “To investigate and depict human psychology with the help of music was what interested Verdi at the time; and articulating Italians’ experience of modernity was exactly that. Verdi continued to write ‘historical operas’, but history disappeared into the background.” (Körner 2013, 184). Given the context of the work's composition and the historical and literary influences that served as inspiration, the demands of the theatrical order multiply, thus giving rise to an interpreter whose stage versatility prevails over a “beautiful” vocal line.

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