

Otello

“dramma lirico” in 4 acts by Giuseppe Verdi

libretto by Arrigo Boito

(based on Shakespeare’s play *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*)

First performance in Europe: Milan, La Scala, 5 February 1887

Characters:

Otello, a Moor in the military service of the Republic of Venice, governor of Cyprus - Tenor

Desdemona, Otello’s wife – Soprano

Iago, an ensign in Otello’s service - Baritone

Cassio, a captain in Otello’s service - Tenor

Emilia, Iago’s wife – Mezzo-soprano

Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman – Tenor

Montano, Otello’s predecessor of Otello as governor of Cyprus - Bass

Lodovico, ambassador from Venice – Bass

A herald - Bass

Venetian soldiers and sailors, Venetian ladies and gentlemen, townspeople of a seaport, young Cypriot peasants, an innkeeper, Greek, Dalmatian, and Albanian soldiers

Setting – a seaport on the island of Cyprus sometime during the period of Venetian suzerainty (1489-1571)

Synopsis

Act I

A seaport in Cyprus, outside the castle, in the evening, during a violent storm; there is an inn with a pergola in the background

The people of Cyprus await the arrival of Otello from a naval battle with the Turks and look out at the sea for his ship to land. At first, it looks as though Otello’s ship will be wrecked on the rocks during a raging storm, but in the end, Otello arrives onshore safely. He announces the destruction of the Turkish fleet to the rejoicing of the Cypriots.

Otello’s ensign Iago offers to help his friend Rodrigo, a young Venetian gentleman, seduce Otello’s wife, Desdemona. Iago bitterly resents Otello’s success as a military commander and is scheming to destroy his life. Iago’s most serious grudge against Otello is his appointment of Cassio as captain of his navy. Iago considers himself much better qualified, yet he must serve Otello instead as a humble ensign.

For the time being, Iago does his best to conceal his contempt for Otello and Cassio and proposes a toast to Otello and his wife, followed by a drinking song (*brindisi*). Out of feigned delight in seeing Cassio enjoy himself, Iago makes certain that he gets quite drunk, so drunk that

he starts a violent commotion with Rodrigo and Montano. When Otello's sees what has happened, he blames Cassio for the disturbance and orders him dismissed from this position as captain. The assembled crowd is ordered to disperse and go home.

Left alone with Desdemona, Otello recalls how and why he fell in love with her. In a moment of heedless ecstasy, Otello summons death. He fears that he will never know such happiness again. For her part, Desdemona prays that their love will remain unchanged. They kiss, overcome with love for each other.

Act II

A hall in the castle divided by a glass partition from a garden

In the hall, Iago suggests to Cassio that he should ask Desdemona to talk to Otello about losing his captaincy. He says he thinks that Desdemona could succeed in getting him reinstated. Desdemona and Iago's wife Emilia, who are close friends, walk together in the garden. Cassio approaches Desdemona and speaks with her.

Otello enters the hall that looks over the garden. Iago pretends not to notice him but makes certain that he hears him say that he is deeply troubled. Cassio sees Otello from afar and quickly walks out of sight. Otello asks Iago what has happened. Iago hints that Cassio and Desdemona are having a love affair. This is enough to make Otello suspicious, but he insists that he would need proof before he could believe that Desdemona would be unfaithful to him. Iago advises Otello to be vigilant.

Desdemona soon approaches Otello to request mercy for Cassio. Otello is not receptive and protests that he has a headache. Desdemona offers to wrap his head in a handkerchief that Otello once gave her. It is a linen handkerchief embroidered with strawberries. Otello impatiently throws it to the ground. It is Emilia who picks it up. Sensing how upset Otello is, Desdemona asks him for forgiveness. In another part of the stage, Iago demands that Emilia give him the handkerchief. He refuses to say why and forcibly takes it away from her in spite of her protests.

Otello dismisses Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona. Alone, he declares that he now believes that Desdemona may be deceiving him. When Iago returns, Otello demands proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Iago is ready with a story claiming that once when he and Cassio were sleeping in the same room, he heard Cassio talking in his sleep to Desdemona. As a part of this dream, Cassio told Desdemona that they must be careful to conceal their love. Iago also claims that he recently saw Cassio carrying Desdemona's embroidered handkerchief. Otello now believes that Desdemona has not been faithful to him and swears vengeance on both Desdemona and Cassio.

Act III

The great hall of the castle with a colonnade leading to a smaller hall

Otello and Iago talk as a herald brings news of the imminent arrival of officials from Venice. Iago tells Otello that he will lure Cassio into the hall and talk with him while Otello watches hidden behind a wall. Iago leaves to get Cassio.

Desdemona enters and reminds Otello of her request to pardon Cassio. As a test of veracity, Otello tells her that his headache has returned, and he asks Desdemona to wrap her handkerchief around his head. Desdemona takes out a handkerchief, but it is not the embroidered one that she wrapped Otello's head in before. Otello demands that she produce the embroidered handkerchief. She says she does not have it. Otello tells her that it is a talisman, and if she loses it, bad luck will befall her. Desdemona will not drop the subject of Cassio, which annoys Otello. She protests that she is faithful once pressed about the matter, and Otello sends her away.

Iago soon calls out that Cassio has arrived, and Otello hides as Iago and Cassio enter together. Cassio says he had hoped to see Desdemona here; he wanted to know whether she had been successful in asking Otello for his pardon. Iago asks him to tell him of his adventures with that woman. Softly, so that Otello cannot hear, Iago says "Bianca," Cassio's actual lover, when asked to specify which woman. As Cassio laughs about his romantic adventures, Otello assumes he is speaking of Desdemona. Cassio tells Iago that a secret admirer left him a handkerchief as a token of affection. Cassio shows it to Iago, who grabs it; it is Desdemona's embroidered handkerchief. He holds it out to be certain that Otello can see it, then returns it to Cassio.

Bugles sound to announce the arrival of the Venetian ambassador, Lodovico. Iago warns Cassio that he should leave, unless he encounters Otello, and he does. Alone with Iago, Otello asks Iago how he should kill his wife. Iago advises Otello to suffocate her in bed, and he will be willing to arrange for the death of Cassio. Otello immediately promotes Iago to be his captain.

Lodovico, Desdemona, Emilia, Roderigo, and other dignitaries enter. When Lodovico makes note of Cassio's absence, Iago tells him that Cassio has fallen out of favor. Desdemona interrupts to tell Lodovico that she hopes he will soon be restored to favor. Otello calls her a demon and almost strikes her violently until is held back by Lodovico. Otello then calls for Cassio. Cassio enters and Otello reads out a letter from the Doge of Venice that announces his recall to Venice. He is to leave for Venice the next day. Cassio is named to succeed Otello as governor of Cyprus. Enraged, Otello throws Desdemona to the ground.

Emilia and Lodovico express their sympathy for Desdemona, while Cassio marvels at his sudden change of fortune. With Cassio triumphant, Iago urges Otello to take his revenge as quickly as possible, and he will arrange for Cassio's murder. He plans to have Roderigo, who is in love with Desdemona, do the dirty work. Iago tells Rodrigo that the only way to prevent Desdemona from leaving Cyprus is for Cassio, the new governor, to die, and he suggests that Roderigo murder Cassio that night.

In a fury, Otello orders everyone to leave. Desdemona tries to comfort him, but Lodovico pulls her away as Otello curses her. As the others leave, Otello alludes once again to the unhappy subject of the handkerchief, then collapses while a crowd of Cypriots hails the victories and glories of Otello. Iago, however, tries to humiliate him, then walks away.

Act IV

Desdemona's bedchamber

Desdemona is getting ready for bed with the assistance of Emilia. She asks Emilia to put out the bridal gown she used on her wedding day, and says that if she dies, she wants to be buried in it. Emilia tells her not to talk about such things. Desdemona recalls how her mother's servant Barbara was abandoned by her lover, and how she used to sing the "Willow Song" (an anonymous English song from Elizabethan times that is specified as sung by Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello*). Once Emilia leaves, Desdemona recites the Ave Maria and falls asleep.

Otello enters silently with a sword. He kisses his wife three times, which causes her to wake up. Otello asks if she has prayed tonight. Since she must die, he does not wish to condemn her soul. He says that he has to kill her because she loves Cassio. Desdemona denies it and asks that he bring in Cassio to corroborate her innocence. Otello says that Cassio is already dead, which greatly distresses Desdemona. She pleads for mercy, but Otello tells her that it is too late and strangles her – but not to death.

Emilia knocks at the door to announce that Cassio has killed Roderigo. Desdemona, still not yet dead, insists she has been unjustly accused. Nonetheless, she will not blame Otello. Finally, she dies.

Emilia calls Otello a murderer, but he says that Iago gave him proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Emilia calls for help when Otello starts to threaten her. Iago, Cassio, and Lodovico enter. Emilia demands a denial of Otello's accusations from Iago, but he refuses to do so. Emilia explains who Iago stole the handkerchief from her for his evil designs, and Cassio confirms that the handkerchief appeared mysteriously in his lodgings. Montano enters and says that Roderigo, with his dying breath, revealed Iago's plot. With nothing to say in his defense, Iago simply runs away.

After he realizes what has happened, Otello is despondent. He draws a dagger from his robe and stabs himself. The others present try to stop him, but they are unable to save his life. Before he dies, he drags himself next to his wife's body and kisses it.

Outline of the History of Venice

- 6th-7th centuries A.D. – migrants from the Byzantine province of Veneto take refuge from barbarian invasions on the islands of the Venetian lagoon; there may have been Roman settlements there at an earlier time, but it is not entirely certain
- 8th century A.D. - the residents on the islands of the Venetian lagoon begin to elect their own governors, known as Doges (dukes); the traditional date of the election of the first doge is 697, but more likely the title was first given ca. 726; until its dissolution in the year 1797 the Venetian state was never ruled by a hereditary monarch and considered itself a republic, the “most serene” republic of Venice
- 9th-10th centuries A.D. – a Venetian state independent from Byzantium emerges by the end of the 10th century A.D.; after two merchants steal the relics of St. Mark the Evangelist and bring them from Alexandria to the lagoon in 828, the saint’s emblem (the lion) becomes the emblem of the Venetian state; the basilica of St. Mark’s was first built to house the relics
- 11th-12th centuries A.D. – by the end of the 11th century, Venice controls the coast of Dalmatia (now Croatia); in return for financial and military support in the struggle against Islam and the Normans, Venice receives commercial concessions in the Byzantine-controlled areas of the Mediterranean and Orient; the city’s rulers became ever more influential in European affairs and open trade routes with the East
- 1204-1217 – the doge Enrico Dandolo takes advantage of the weakness of the Byzantine empire in demanding that the soldiers participating in the Fourth Crusade pay for their Venetian transportation by laying siege to the Byzantine capital of Constantinople; the Byzantine emperors in power at that time are forced out of the city, a new dynasty is installed, and the Venetians bring home a great deal of plunder; the crusaders never make it to the Holy Land as originally planned; the city of Genoa forms an alliance with the deposed emperors in opposition to Venice, the beginning of the epic rivalry between Venice and Genoa; between 1206 and 1217, Venice fought for control of Crete with Genoa, which finally relinquished the island to Venice
- 1261-1299 – with the support of Genoa, the deposed Byzantine emperors re-establish themselves and take away many of the former commercial privileges that Venice enjoyed; wars between Venice and Genoa end with a truce in 1299 in which neither side gains a decisive advantage; during the late 13th century, a tightly-knit political class of Venetian noble families creates new political institutions to solidify their power; by the end of the 13th century, the population of Venice reaches about 120,000, making it one of the largest cities in Europe
- 1338-1339 – Treviso and the surrounding region are overrun, the first attempt to establish Venetian power on the Italian mainland

- 1347-1349 – half the population of Venice perishes during the Black Plague, a disaster that leads to a serious economic crisis and the loss of Dalmatia to Hungary
- 1378-1381 – conflicts with the rulers of Genoa, Padua, Ferrara, and Milan come to a head; the Genoese fleet actually enters the Venetian lagoon in 1379 and nearly topples the government, but is repulsed; a treaty in 1381 stabilizes the situation; Genoa, exhausted after her struggles with Venice and wracked by domestic strife, is never again a serious threat to Venice
- 1386-1499 – a glorious period of territorial expansion in the Mediterranean and on the Italian mainland facilitated by the neutralization of Genoa; Corfu falls to Venice in 1386, followed by the Albanian coast a few years later; Dalmatia is recaptured between 1409 and 1420; the last great Mediterranean possession to fall to Venice is Cyprus in the year 1489; within twenty years of the year 1404, Venice captures Padua, Vicenza, Verona, Belluna, Udine, and the Friuli on the Italian mainland, followed by Bergamo and Brescia in 1428, Legnano in 1440, Ravenna in 1442, Crema in 1454, Rovigo in 1484, and Cremona in 1499
- 1509 – further attempts at expansion in Italy led to the formation of military alliances against Venice with the result that its armies are routed at the battle of Agnadello; Venice loses many possessions, but is able to regain nearly all of them within ten years; ever after, Venice maintains neutrality in Italian political affairs, but continues to struggle with the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean for nearly three centuries; the later sixteenth century in Venice witnesses a Golden Age of art and architecture, the leading artistic figures Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese
- 1516 – Jews are permitted to reside in a section of the city in the Cannaregio district known as the Ghetto (meaning the “foundry”), the first segregated area for an ethnic or religious minority known by this name; Jews are not allowed to live in any other part of the city until 1797
- 1570-1573 – the battle of Lepanto against Turkey in 1571 results in a victory for Christian forces, but no relief for a declining Venetian empire in the Mediterranean; Cyprus and other territories are lost to Turkey in 1570-73; the cost of the wars leads to indebtedness and heavy taxation; the Age of Discovery in western Europe leads to a decline in the importance of Venetian trade routes to the East; industrial activity in western and central Europe contributes to a decline in the importance of Venetian manufactures
- 1575-1577 – an outbreak of the plague wipes out one third of the population of Venice; at its height in the 16th century (never exceeded since) the population stood at about 190,000 inhabitants
- 1630 – a fresh outbreak of the plague along with a series of economic disasters leads to an irreversible decline in the political power of the Venetian Republic; ruinous

- wars with Turkey result in the loss of further territories in the Mediterranean later in the seventeenth century, most importantly the island of Crete in 1669; by the eighteenth century, the city is heavily dependent on tourism for income while its citizenry becomes ever more impoverished and its armed forces ever more impotent
- 1756 – Giacomo Casanova’s legendary escape from The Leads (the state prison of Venice)
- 1797 – after decades of weakness, Napoleon Bonaparte invades the remaining mainland Italian territories controlled by Venice more or less unopposed and dissolves the Venetian state
- 1798 – at the Treaty of Campo Formio, the former Venetian possessions are turned over to Austria
- 1806 – Venice is reconquered by French troops
- 1814 – French troops are driven out by Austria, who is ceded Venetia at the Congress of Vienna
- 1846 – a railway bridge is constructed to link Venice with the mainland of Italy
- 1848 – a revolt against the Austrians leads to their temporary expulsion and the formation of a provisional Venetian government; the Austrians regain control of the city the next year
- 1866 – the Austrians cede Venetia to the new kingdom of Italy (founded in 1859) after their defeat at the battle of Sadowa against the Prussians; the king of Italy had supported the Prussians against the Austrians during the Seven Weeks’ War in hopes that the provinces of Venetia and Lombardy could be recovered for Italy
- 1883 – Death of Richard Wagner in the Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi on the Grand Canal
- 1932 – a road bridge is constructed to link Venice with the mainland of Italy; during the 1920s and 1930s, attempts to revive economic conditions by building up the port of Marghera are successful, however the economic development leads to vast ecological problems and in the long run does nothing to stem a rapid drop in the population of Venice after World War II due to migration to the mainland; less than 60,000 residents were left by the end of the year 2009, the fewest in the city since the Dark Ages
- 1973 – the beginning of massive subsidies from the Italian government to preserve the city’s architectural treasures from destruction due to neglect and environmental disruptions