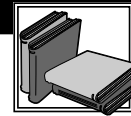


Chapter 23 Biography Activity

The idea of a unified Italy gained strength under Napoleon, and harsh rule by Austria led to revolution (textbook pages 591–595). One outspoken leader for Italian unity was the composer Giuseppe Verdi, whose words and music inspired many patriots. ♦ *As you read, think about the influence that artists can have on the history and politics of their time. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

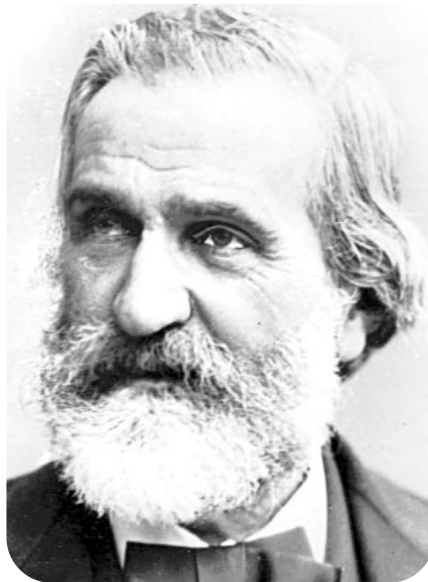
Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)

Few great musicians have been as deeply involved in politics as the composer Giuseppe Verdi was in the movement for Italian unity and freedom from Austrian rule. The theme of liberty and opposition to tyranny runs through his operas and choral works. Many of Verdi's operas ran into trouble with the Austrian government's political censors, who would not let them be presented because the plots portrayed rulers as unjust or showed other ideas they thought "dangerous." Sometimes Verdi rewrote to satisfy the censors, but the message usually shone through.

In *Nabucco* (1842), Verdi's first successful opera, a chorus of captives in the ancient Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar sing movingly about their hopes for freedom. Italian patriots borrowed the song, and it still remains a favorite patriotic song in Italy. Even the letters of Verdi's name became part of the Italian nationalist movement. The crowds that shouted "Viva Verdi" were using a widely understood shorthand for "Viva Vittorio Emmanuele, Re d'Italia" (Long live Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy).

The small village where Verdi was born in 1813 was part of Napoleon's conquests in Italy, but soon came under Austrian rule after Napoleon's defeat a

few years later. Verdi's family was poor, and he had his first music lessons from the village organist. A wealthy local merchant recognized his talent, and at 18 Verdi went to Milan to study. His first works—which failed—were produced at the famous La Scala opera house there, but so were many later successes.



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By the time he was in his thirties, Verdi was the outstanding composer of Italian operas. Audiences loved their dramatic stories, strong characters, and stirring melodies. His career continued for fifty years, making him internationally famous. When Italy became a nation in 1860, Verdi served briefly in its parliament at the urging of Count Cavour but soon went back to concentrating on music.

Some of Verdi's best-loved operas are *Rigoletto* (1851), *La Traviata* (1853), and *Aida* (1871), an opera set in Egypt that was commissioned by the ruler of Egypt to celebrate the opening of

the Suez Canal. Verdi adapted several of Shakespeare's plays into opera form, including *Otello* (1887) and his last opera, *Falstaff*, written when he was 80 years old. He also wrote religious choral works. His great 1874 setting of the *Requiem* (the mass for the dead) honored an Italian patriot, Alessandro Manzoni.

Questions to Think About

1. How did Verdi's work add to the cause of Italian unity?
2. What double meaning did the cheer "Viva Verdi" have for the crowds who used it?
3. **Predicting Consequences** What kind of effects do you think censorship has on the work of artists, writers, and musicians? How did it affect Verdi's work?