

Nors S. Josephson: Tonal organization in Verdi's *Otello*

Edward Cone's extensive researches into Verdi's music have revealed that his late operas from the 1880's and 1890's embody and develop a single tonality.¹ In particular, Verdi's *Otello* (1887) is a model of tonal cohesion and clarity. As many Verdi scholars (including Cone) have observed, the opera's main tonality of E-major is distinctly associated with Otello, in particular his triumphant entry in Act I, bars 166–168 (*lo vinse l'uragano*) and his regal dialogue with the herold (announcing the arrival of the Venetian ambassadors to Cyprus) at the outset of Act III, bar 35. A related stentorian employment of E-major may be observed in Otello's heroic outburst, *Ah! mille vite* (Act II, bars 645–653), where he swears vengeance on Cassio. Likewise, his entry in Desdemona's bed chamber in Act IV, beginning of Scene 3 (bars 304–310) and his final valedictory suicide-farewell at the close of Act IV, bars 554–571 utilize the identical majestic home key of E-major. It will be noted the last two of these E-episodes are both colored with an upper sixth *ajoutée* on c#, a tertial effect that is probably related to Act I's introductory C# major chord accompanying Otello's *Esultate*² in bars 157–160. But E-major may also be described as Otello's domestic love tonality, especially during the close of Act I's love duet (... *più non mi sarà concesso* ..., bars 921–925) and *Un bacio*³ ..., 942–955). Not surprisingly, a similar lyrical E-major idiom is restated at Otello's reaffirmation of his love for Desdemona in Act II at the line, *Quel canto mi conquide*, bars 371–372, again with a prominent upper sixth on c#. Desdemona's reciprocal love for Otello in Acts II (:chorus-serenade in bars 266–378) and III (*Dio ti giocondi, o sposo*..., bars 57–85 with reprise in 249–257) utilizes a related *bel canto* idiom in E-major, again with frequent accented *sixtes ajoutées* on the upper c#.³

Musical example 1: Desdemona's related *bel canto*-like idiom: E-major entries in Act II and III

a) Act II
[Allegro moderato]
372
pp

b) Act III
[Allegro moderato]
57
pp

In this subtle way Verdi reaffirms the underlying love affinity between his two main characters.

In the first three acts this clear emphasis on the E-major tonic is often introduced by a more sombre idiom in the parallel key of e-minor, which is typically associated with natural calamities or Otello's increasing self-doubts and psychological ambivalence. Already the two Act I choruses, *Vittoria! Sterminio!* (bars 171–263) and *Fuoco di gioia!* (317–401) alternate between a Phrygian-like e-minor (with F#!) and a concluding, brighter E-major. Similarly, Otello's initial pangs of jealousy in Act II, bars 211–266 are centered on his agitated e-minor outbursts in 211–215 (*chiostro dell'anima*) and 258–263 (... *la prova ... amore e gelosia* ...). To be sure, these are *temporarily* resolved by the ensuing bucolic chorus, *Dove guardi* and Otello's lyrical reaffirmation of his love in E-major at *Quel canto mi conquide* in bars 371–372. In the following Act III e-minor is again conspicuously present when Otello takes furious hold of Desdemona (bars 738–742), when he curses her in 859–863 (*Anima mia ti maledico!*, with upper F# harmonies) and finally when he swoons in 868–875. A tentative, veiled resolution