On the “Bacio” Theme in Otello

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At the climax of the love duet ending Act I of Verdi’s Otello, as Otello and Desdemona kiss—“un bacio ... Otello! ... un bacio ...”—the orchestra plays a special new melody, the “bacio” theme. This music does not appear again until the last act, where it is played twice, at Otello’s entrance and at his suicide. With reference to the recurrence of this theme in Act IV, Joseph Kerman has written:

It is a famous dramatic stroke; many listeners, I believe, would have to search hard in their memory of Verdi’s operas or of anyone else’s to match its extraordinary feeling of summation, poignancy, and catharsis.1

The dramatic context of the theme’s recapitulation—which occurs just before Otello murders Desdemona and later after he has learned of her innocence and has fatally stabbed himself—contributes in no small way to the shattering impact of Verdi’s musical gesture. Yet this would not have been possible if the “bacio” theme had not had a haunting beauty of its own.

Underlying its tender, passionate, longing quality is a melodic design of classic simplicity and balance (see ex. 2, p. 213). Verdi articulates his 8-measure theme into four 2-measure sub-groups, and begins all but the last of them with a unifying melodic motive, the appoggiatura C♯–B. He uses the same rhythmic idea for the first two groups; for the third group he fragments the 2-measure idea into two statements of its first measure; and in the final group he augments and reorders rhythmic motives from the first measure (fig. 1):

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The formal construction of the theme is therefore a model example of what Schoenberg, in his book *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, calls classical sentence structure. From a stylistic point of view, the harmony of the theme is characteristic of late nineteenth-century practice in its use of complex chord-structures and chromatic voice leading. What is most striking to my ear, however, is the treatment of the two $\frac{3}{4}$ chords: the E-major one that ushers in the theme, and the C-major one that enters in a hushed whisper just before the final cadence. Neither of these chords behaves according to textbook rules of harmony, yet Schenkerian analysis can explain both satisfactorily. Example 1 is a voice-leading graph of the theme.

The basic structure of the theme is a prolongation of the E-major $\frac{3}{4}$ chord. Ex. 1b shows this most clearly. The B in the bass line is a retained tone which returns in m. 8, where the prolonged $\frac{3}{4}$ chord resolves to the dominant.

The prolongation involves a linear unfolding of the tonic triad through a descending motion by thirds in the bass line, from B through G$\sharp$ to E. Chromatic passing tones fill in the first third, B–G$\sharp$, and a lower neighbor note embellishes the G$\sharp$. After reaching the root, E, the line returns to the fifth, B, by means of an ascending arpeggio, this time through the minor third, G$\flat$, in m. 7. Such mixture of modes is typical of the harmonic practice of nineteenth-century Italian opera composers, and of Verdi in particular.

The top voice of the theme, reduced in ex. 1a, can be analyzed as follows. Initially, the structural tone is B. This is embellished by the appoggiatura C$\sharp$ and the lower neighbor note A$\sharp$ in mm. 1–3. (The C$\sharp$ is prolonged by the neighbor motion D$\sharp$–C$\sharp$ in m. 2.) In m. 4, B is retained, though temporarily masked by a projection of an inner voice, F$\sharp$–E$\flat$, above the structural top voice. In mm. 5–6 the appoggiatura C$\sharp$ again embellishes the structural tone, both in the original register and in the upper octave. C$\flat$ in m. 7 is an incomplete upper neighbor note to the structural tone—incomplete because it does not return to B. The final structural descent to the tonic takes place from the third, G$\flat$, in m. 8.

In summary, the overall sense of the "bacio" theme is of a protracted cadence in E major, the resolution of whose cadential $\frac{3}{4}$ chord is delayed by prolongation. The prolongation gives special prominence to an interpolated $\frac{3}{4}$ chord on $\frac{6}{4}$ (C major) just before the resolution to V. Verdi was well aware of the importance of this C-major $\frac{3}{4}$ chord, for he changed the orchestration at the moment of its appearance and marked it *ppp morendo*, expressive nuances which suggest that this chord is much more than a purely local harmonic color. Tracing its important structural implications is one of the objects of the present investigation.

Before proceeding, however, it is worth pointing out that there are precedents for this identical harmonic solution in earlier Verdi

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1Further search would probably turn up other examples. Another from the same year as *Macbeth* is found in *Masnadieti*; see the Kalmus piano-vocal score, no. 6739, pp. 61–62.
Two well-known examples come to mind. Their close relationship to the Otello example is all the more surprising because of their early date of composition. The first is from the Sleepwalking Scene in Act IV of Macbeth (1847) and the second is from the duet between Rigoletto and Sparafucile in Act I of Rigoletto (1851) (ex. 3).
The similarity between these examples and the “bacio” theme is immediately obvious to the ear, but their differences are significant. In the earlier works, the cadential $\frac{4}{4}$ chord proceeds directly to the $\frac{4}{4}$ chord on $b\text{VI}$, and the lowered sixth degree in the upper voice resolves into the dominant chord of the cadential progression. In the Macbeth passage, Verdi treats the $\frac{6}{6}$ degree as a 9-8 suspension over the root of the dominant harmony. In the Rigoletto excerpt, he treats it as a harmonized chromatic passing tone in a linear ascent from the root, C, to the third, E, of the dominant chord.

I mention these differences in order to throw the “bacio” theme into greater relief, for it is clear that in one sense the unusual harmonic processes of the theme are Verdian stylistic traits that date back at least as far as 1847. Yet now the prolongation of the space between the two $\frac{4}{4}$ chords has been made extraordinarily rich. And how poignant it is that the $\frac{6}{6}$ degree, C, in the top voice remains an incomplete neighbor note, instead of moving on to a resolution as it had done in the earlier operas.

The sense of incompleteness at this point, the demand for continuation, is generated by two factors in the top voice (see ex. 1a). Not only does Verdi leave the C suspended as an incomplete neighbor note, but he also chooses not to fill in the space between the fifth, B, and the third, $G_b$, before commencing the structural descent to the tonic. He leaves a structural gap between the third and the fifth in the melodic line. To be sure, at the very end of the opera, after the final, cathartic statement of the “bacio” theme, the C does at last resolve to B, but even there it does so in a lower octave and in an inner voice (pp. 364/2/2–364/3/4).4

At the end of Act I, though, the absence of an immediate resolution of the C and the structural gap between the $G_b$ and B determine the continuation and conclusion of the love duet, and indeed the conclusion of the entire act. Verdi’s compositional solution at this point is as novel and daring as it is utterly convincing and moving. Let us examine briefly the passage on pages 106–108, from the “bacio” theme to the end of the act.

The orchestration plays a critical role in these final measures of the duet, because it helps to clarify the structural linear progression. The melodic line of the “bacio” theme is played in unison by oboe, clarinet, and first violins (tremolo) in mm. 1–4. The flute joins these instruments in mm. 5–6, and the English horn, an octave lower, in m. 6. In m. 7 the flute, oboe and English horn drop out after playing the $C_b$, leaving only the clarinet and voice to complete the melodic line. The C has been left hanging not only in a linear sense, then, but also quite literally by the orchestration. Two measures after the cadence, in fact, the flute and English horn reenter in unison on $A_1$; filling in the gap between $G_b$ and B, they continue their chromatic ascent to $B_7$ (enharmonically, C). Having picked up the incomplete neighbor note, C, these instruments then resolve it upward to $C_b$. The $C_b$ becomes the root of the final harmony in the act. After $C_b$ is reached, the old bass note E is brought into the upper register by the harp, and then resolved to F by the voice, second violins, and flute. The melodic resolution from E to F results in the extraordinarily beautiful $D_b$ chord which is prolonged until the end of the act.

The logic of the voice leading helps to clarify the unusual processes at work in the “bacio” theme and its continuation. The voice leading, however, is a necessary consequence of the composer’s decision to establish at this point a strong connection between three different key areas: E, C, and $D_b$. Verdi has set up the juxtaposition of these three areas very carefully, not only in the love duet, but throughout the first act. All three keys hold important dramatic associations.

The determination of dramatic associations for particular key areas in an opera is to some extent, no doubt, a subjective process. The analyst or critic must base his decisions upon the sense of the text, or the meaning of a dramatic situation as he understands it, together with his perception of large-scale tonal relations. Just as it is undesirable to pin down

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4Cf. the Ricordi piano-vocal score of the opera, pl. no. 51023, ed. Mario Parenti (1964). In page references the first number indicates the page, the second the system, and the third the measure within the system.
a Wagnerian Leitmotiv to one simple label, so it is unwise to attempt to interpret tonal and dramatic associations in a rigid way. Opera is theater, and good theater is constantly in a state of flux; associations established early in an opera are likely to acquire new shades of meaning as the drama unfolds. Nonetheless, it is widely understood that increasingly during the nineteenth century opera composers employed tonality for dramatic effects of various kinds. What can we tell about the tonal-dramatic associations of the keys E, C, and D♭ in the first act of Otello?

Of the three keys, C major is perhaps the easiest to comprehend in dramatic terms. It spells disaster for Otello. The sonority which prepares for the eventual emergence of this key is undoubtedly the bass C at the very opening of the opera, where Verdi musically delineates the storm in its most violent phase. As the lowest and most audible note in the famous three-note cluster of the organ, C persists as an implacable presence until the storm has fully abated.5

Verdi first establishes C as an important key area in connection with Iago. Speaking with Roderigo, Iago concludes his account of why he hates Otello with the chilling admission “se il Moro io fossi, vedermi non vorrei d’attorno un lago.” Verdi sets these lines with a musical phrase which ends with a strong authentic cadence in C (p. 35/3/1–35/4/2). The ensuing chorus “Fuoco di gioia” in E minor—major temporarily eclipses C. After the chorus is over, though, and Iago resumes his plotting with Roderigo, the music returns from E to C (p. 55). Later, Iago’s hypocritical account to Otello of the duel between Cassio and Montano begins in C (“Non so, qui tutti eran cortesi amici . . .”—p. 90/2/3). Otello’s response to Iago’s story is to dismiss Cassio as his captain, and in giving that command, Otello takes what is to become the first step in his own undoing. Significantly, the musical setting for the line “Cassio, non sei più capitano!” is a cadence in C [p. 92/4/2–4].

It seems clear from the above examples that Iago intends to lead Otello to C major, in order to “drag him to ruin,” as he expresses it at another C-major cadential phrase in Act II [p. 122/3/2–123/1/1]. In the second act Iago uses this key at stage after stage of his intrigue, with more and more disastrous consequences for Otello. In C Iago decides to offer Desdemona’s handkerchief as proof of her infidelity (p. 170), and in C he narrates Cassio’s dream to Otello [pp. 186ff.]. In the third act, the scene in which Otello overhears Iago and Cassio and sees Desdemona’s handkerchief in Cassio’s hand is again in C [pp. 245ff.]. Finally, the shattering conclusion of Act III, where Otello goes completely to pieces in front of the Venetian ambassadors, begins and ends in C [see especially pp. 251ff. and 322–23]. The use of C major to underscore Otello’s fall and Iago’s triumph has a harsh, glaring quality that hardly agrees with our “normal” associations with this key. Yet Verdi drives his point home with the most massive scoring in the entire work—full orchestra, plus sixteen brass instruments backstage.7 The effect is similar to that of Hagen’s summoning of the Gibich vassals in Act II, scene iii of Wagner’s Götterdämmerung.

The dramatic associations of the two other key areas summarized at the end of Act I of Otello—E and D♭—are more difficult to grasp or characterize. From the moment of their first appearance in the opera, these two keys are closely linked. And Verdi sets them

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5The three notes are C, C♯, and D. Verdi instructs the organist to play them on the pedals, and to sustain the cluster for the first fifty-three pages of the orchestral score, until the chorus’s line “Si calma la bufera.” As a noise, this cluster does much to portray “the fury of the elements” (Francis Toye, Giuseppe Verdi, His Life and Works [New York, 1931] p. 420); as a pitch, it serves as a nagging reminder that the opening chord of the opera must eventually be resolved. More about this point below.

6The melodic line and the harmony of the first two measures of this phrase lead the listener to expect a minor tonic in the third measure. However, the orchestra does not support Otello’s arrival with a C-minor chord on the downbeat. Instead, after an eighth-note rest, it plays a motive in parallel tenths that replaces the minor third, B♭, with E♭. Adding a seventh, B♭, this motive points the harmony in the direction of the key of F, to which Iago promptly takes it.

7The extraordinary B♭ in the fanfares [p. 256]—actually the seventh partial in the overtone series, quasi B♭–A♯—relates C to E♭. The resulting chord is capable of resolution to the dominant of E major. Moreover, the addition of B♭ to the C major triad links the fanfares with the opening chord of the opera.

215
into dramatic relief by saving them for Othello’s entrance. The storm music preceding the protagonist’s safe arrival is tonally quite ambiguous. Even the choral outburst “Dio fulgor della bufera,” which strongly implies A minor, lacks tonal closure; its final cadence is deceptive (p. 16/2/2). But when the chorus shouts later that Othello’s ship is safe—“E salvò! è salvò!”—we expect an authentic cadence in E major. Again the cadence is deceptive, resolving to the submediant C♯-minor chord (p. 18/2/1–3). This harmony is elaborated through Othello’s entrance. Beginning in C♯ major, he modulates to E major and makes the first unequivocal authentic cadence in the opera: “Dopo l’armi io vincerò l’uragano” (pp. 21/2/1–22/3/1).

So it is Othello who, having conquered the Moslems and having survived the hurricane, first brings tonal order into the opera. This is one reason why his entrance is so electrifying. It is terribly important that the protagonist’s first appearance electrify, because his greatness must be transmitted overwhelmingly in this brief act so that his tragic fall will arouse both terror and pity. This is a problem not only of the opera, but of Shakespeare’s play as well. Mark Van Doren writes:

To speak only of Othello’s deception by Iago and the accident, the misunderstandings, the coincidences which make this deception work smoothly, is to overemphasize the mechanics of the catastrophe; or it is not to see them at all. The superb machinery of Othello shows us more than a man whom various tricks of external fate combine in an awful moment to render pitiful. . . . Othello is a great and fearful man; one who generates his own tragic atmosphere as he goes, and one therefore to whom nothing is utterly accidental. The precarious balance in his nature between the monstrous and the tender, the giant and the lover, the soldier and the man, is a balance of powers no one of which can be denied its reality. Add the conflict in him between the past and the present, the remote and the local, the free and the confined, add once again his genius for extending and expressing himself in the whole atmosphere of the world at whose center he moves; and it will be seen that he deserves his tragedy. It is both his punishment and his privilege; his punishment, because in the permanent order of things dimensions like his must be reduced; his privilege, because they are his dimensions and his alone.9

If this holds for Shakespeare’s play, it certainly holds also for Boito’s libretto. In order to reduce the play to manageable dimensions for music, the librettist was obliged to cut or compress much of the dialogue that Shakespeare had used to unfold this duality in Othello’s character. I believe, however, that Verdi took pains to bring this duality to expression in his music, and that tonal-dramatic associations lie at the heart of his solution. This is already a factor at Othello’s entrance, where the setting of his first lines in the opera juxtaposes the keys C♯ major-minor—enharmonically D♭ major-minor—and E major, thus establishing an important tonal relationship between them. The juxtaposition of these two keys can be regarded as a musical analogue for what Van Doren calls the “precarious balance” in Othello’s nature. Shakespeare does not reveal both sides of Othello’s nature all at once; neither does Verdi spell out the particular dramatic significance of each of the two keys immediately.

E major, at this early stage of the drama,

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9We owe the dramatic conception of this stunning entrance to Verdi himself. Boito had buried what are now Othello’s opening lines in the midst of some dialogue which the composer found unnecessary and ineffective:

**TUTTI**

**JAGO** [a Roderigo]

**OTHELLO** [a Iago]

**JAGO**

**OTHELLO** [a Iago, famigliarmente]

E vivia Othello.

Sia dannato Othello.

E Desdemona?

Attende nel castello.

Onesto Jago, Cassio, buon Montano

E voi tutti esultate e suoni a festa

Tutta Cipro. L’orgoglio musulmano

Sepolto è in mar etc.

(See Alessandro Luzio, *Carteggi verdiiani* [Rome, 1935] II, 104.) Boito applauded Verdi’s decision to cut the extra verses in an undated letter to the composer which Luzio assigns to 1886:


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appears to represent the military, more impersonal side of Otello's nature. The text for the passage in which Otello first cadences in E suggests this interpretation; and the following chorus—"Vittoria, vittoria!"—celebrating his victory and safe return—confirms it. This chorus is also in E minor-major, as is its counterpart and sequel "Fuoco di gioia" later in the act. To pick up Van Doren's point, though, the key of E expresses not only Otello's greatness but also, as an element of his greatness, his tragic destiny. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that the opera ends in E major, with the death of the protagonist. During the working-out of the drama, the noble and heroic qualities in Otello's character become progressively weakened under the impact of Iago's vicious intrigues. In an analogous way, Verdi pits C major—the key associated with Iago's intrigues—against E major. As the drama mounts to its crisis in Acts II and III, C gradually erodes the power of E.

Verdi establishes the importance of D♭(C♯) major-minor, but he does not yet explain it, at Otello's entrance. A possible interpretation first reveals itself in the love duet. From the use of D♭ there, it seems to me that Verdi intended this key to represent the other side of Otello's nature—his tender side as man and lover.

This extraordinary duet touches the whole history of Otello's and Desdemona's love, the ecstasy of their present unity after the preceding strife, and forebodings of the tragic destruction of their love. The music for the duet is so rich that it could easily be the subject of a separate study. Our investigation will focus on those passages which establish dramatic associations for the key of D♭. We shall also attempt to show how D♭ interacts with E and C in preparation for the poignant summary of these tonal relations by the "bacio" theme and its continuation. But first we must examine the larger dramatic and musical context from which these harmonic details derive their meaning.

There is no equivalent for the love duet in Shakespeare's play, as is well known. It is Boito's invention. One could argue that a love duet between the principals was a necessary convention of nineteenth-century Italian opera, a convention which Boito, perhaps against his better judgement as a dramatist, respected only because he knew that it would draw glorious music from the Maestro. Whether this is true or not is unimportant; the point is that the placement of the duet is a brilliant dramatic stroke. Imagine how differently the duet would affect us if it had occurred immediately after Otello's safe arrival on shore. There, nothing would have stood in the way of a tonally unclouded exchange of sentiments. Here, the very circumstances that bring the lovers together are troubled. Iago has successfully incited a riot violent enough to wake not only Otello—whose presence Iago needs for the furtherance of his designs—but also Desdemona. From the outset, then, the lovers find themselves together in this scene not out of their own choice, but rather as the consequence of the machinations of a man bent on destroying them.10

This situation is reflected in the music. On one level, the F-major tonality which marks the end of the riot can be understood as the final resolution of the unresolved dominant-eleventh chord on C that opens the opera. On a deeper level, though, this long-delayed resolution is far from satisfying. For the destructive force of nature which that dominant-eleventh chord represented has not been removed; rather it has been transferred into the C-major tonality within which Iago operates as Otello's mortal adversary. Otello's dismissal of Cassio is signalled by a strong cadence in C, as we have seen earlier. Iago's lines "O mio trionfo" immediately move the

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10The idea that hostile forces are lurking beneath the serene surface of this love duet is explicitly expressed in the original draft of the libretto. There Boito had provided for the sudden appearance, in the background, of Iago "smirking with contempt at the embracing couple" and muttering the following lines:

IAGO Soave accordo ove l'amor si stempra
Con blando accento
E vago!
Infragrè l'armoniosa tempra
Di quel concerto.
Fede d'onesto Jago! [Luzio, Carteggi, II, 97.]
Verdi decided to cut these lines [according to Luzio, loc. cit.]. Yet readers familiar with the libretto will recognize these deleted verses, for the composer found another use
tonality from C to F [pp. 92/4–493/1]. Clearly, the key of F represents, at least temporarily, the fulfillment of Iago’s most devious ambitions.

Otello begins the duet in Gb major—a key as remote from F as one could imagine. Desdemona’s music returns surprisingly to F, though, and by means of a juxtaposition of an E-major chord in first inversion with a C-major chord in root position: “Te ne tammenti” [p. 96/4(1–3). This is the first instance in the duet of the juxtaposition of the two harmonies that will be so important in the climactic “bacio” theme.

The long central section of the duet is in F major-minor, a key that, as we have seen, Iago had previously introduced in reaction to Cassio’s dismissal. Verdi seems content to keep Desdemona in this key; she reintroduces it after Otello sings in Gb, and she keeps returning to it in spite of his attempts to move away from it. What is the meaning of this gentle tug-of-war of tonalities? Surely no one could be farther from being Iago’s accomplice than Desdemona. The gesture is complex. I suggest that several factors are operative in the choice of F major at this point. On a subliminal level, the use of this key suggests that Iago’s venom is already beginning to work. But in another sense Desdemona’s acceptance of F major can be understood as an indication of how far she is from being capable of the infidelity which Otello later suspects her of. Her innocence is so transcendent that she can accept the key of F without any inkling of its danger or its tragic implications. [Let us not forget that the murder duet in Act IV begins in F minor.]

So much for the larger dramatic and tonal framework of the duet. Db first arises in the duet during the narrative—whose text is worked in from Act I of the play—of Otello’s courtship of Desdemona. In contrast to the play, Boito has Desdemona begin the reminiscence; Otello’s lines—“pingea dell’armi il fremito”—merely continue the description, which she has started, of his past suffering. His music, though it touches G minor and C major, does not move out of the orbit of F major-minor; if anything it reinforces this tonality by prolonging its supertonic (G minor) and dominant (C major) as part of a larger cadential progression in F. When he describes the effect of her great sympathy on him, however, he moves decisively away from F, through Ab, to a firm cadence in Db [pp. 100/3–101/3]. The text for this moving passage reads as follows, in William Weaver’s translation:

Your lovely face ennobled the story
With tears and your lip with sighs;
On my darkness glory descended,
Paradise, and the stars to give their blessing.11

The reference to “paradise, and the stars” in the text accords well with the images of “the

glowing Pleiades descending” and “Venus shining” at the end of the act, where the tonality is also D♭. After Otello’s D♭ cadence, Desdemona returns easily to F, for the beautiful closing section “E tu m’ama’vii.”

The next and final occurrence of D♭ before the “bacio” theme takes place during the coda to the F-major section. This passage pulls together D♭, E, and C in preparation for the poignant summary made by the “bacio” theme and its continuation; we need to examine it in some detail. It begins on p. 103/2/1, and extends to the onset of the “bacio” theme on p. 106.

The “precarious balance” of Otello’s nature is powerfully expressed in the text of this passage. He rejoices in the “ecstasy of this embrace,” but at the same time, his joy is so intense that he fears that he “will not be granted again this divine moment in the unknown future of [his] destiny.” And Verdi’s musical setting of this crucial passage confirms, I think, the tonal-dramatic associations postulated so far for D♭, E, and C. Ex. 4 is a voice-leading graph from the end of the principal F-major cadence (p. 103/2/1) up to the “bacio” theme (p. 106/1/1). Foreground detail has been omitted from this example in order to show the overall motion as clearly as possible.

The overall motion of the passage is from F major to the dominant of E major. The space between the two chords is elaborated by a passing motion through D♭ major-minor. This chord arises contrapuntally as a harmonized anticipation in the top voice—or rather as a consonant preparation, D♭, which changes enharmonically to C♯ at the point of suspension over the bass note B, and then resolves to B (a 9–8 suspension). The D♭ chord is prolonged by a self-arpeggiation in the bass line: D♭, the root, A♭, the fifth, and F♭, the minor third. This prolongation coincides with Otello’s description of “the ecstasy of this embrace”; D♭ is associated with the tender side of Otello’s nature.

When, however, Otello fears that he “will not be granted again this divine moment in the unknown future of his destiny” (p. 104/1/2–104/3/1), the bass line drops to B, the dominant of E major, and the music strikingly anticipates and prepares the “bacio” theme: tonally, harmonically, and even motivically. Like the “bacio” theme, this passage is in E major; it is a prolongation of the resolution of the cadential Ⅳ chord to the dominant; and the upper voice features the motivic appoggiatura C♯–B (though embellished here by a passing C♮). This is the first recurrence of E major since the chorus “Fuoco di gioia.” In the light of my earlier remarks about the dramatic associations of E, the return of this key as a setting for these particular lines is especially moving. The return stirs us because it suggests that Otello’s very greatness and glory contain the seeds of his own instability and, ultimately, his own destruction.

Example 4

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12Ibid., pp. 445–46.
Verdi does not allow Otello to cadence in E yet, though the cadence is deceptive, with $b VI - C$ major—replacing the expected tonic. C major is prolonged by the setting of Desdemona’s prayer that “love not change as the years change” (pp. 104/3/1–105/2/1). As ex. 4 shows, the long C-major elaboration interrupts the cadential motion in E that had begun on p. 104/1/3. This interruption makes the “bacio” theme a structural necessity, in order that the cadential motion in E may be picked up and completed. The use of C major for Desdemona’s prayer is supremely, tragically ironic: for C is the very key which Iago will use to bring about Otello’s downfall and the end of their love. After Desdemona’s part comes to a cadence in C, the bass line moves up briefly to $C _ { \sharp }$ and then descends to $B$ for the “bacio” theme.

Before leaving this remarkable passage, I wish to point out two interesting details. The first is that the principal melodic motion in the upper voice at the beginning of the passage—C, $C _ { \sharp }$, B—recurs in the bass at the end of the passage. Horizontal brackets show this in ex. 4. The second is that the passage has a unifying melodic motive, a linear ascent from the dominant to the tonic: 5–6–7–8. This important melodic motive first appears in the F-major section of the duet [p. 97], and then after Otello’s first cadence in $D _ { \flat }$ [p. 101/3/1]. What is fascinating about this motive is that, in a chromatically altered but clearly recognizable form, it serves as the linear skeleton for the final motion from E to $D _ { \flat }$ at the end of the act:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$G _ { \sharp }$</th>
<th>$A _ { # }$</th>
<th>(B)</th>
<th>$B _ { # }$</th>
<th>$C _ { # }$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$C _ { # }$</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>E:</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$# 4$</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are now in a better position to understand the tonal and dramatic associations of the “bacio” theme and the end of the act. The theme is in E major; it therefore alludes to all the important E-major areas earlier in the act—Otello’s victory over the Moslems, the cessation of the storm, his anguish, and his anxiety about his destiny, as expressed in the E-major cadential motion earlier in the duet, which the “bacio” theme picks up and completes.

The kiss itself is the gesture which unites Otello with Desdemona. This union, representing the highest expression of Otello’s most tender, human qualities, is symbolized, I think, by the radiant $D _ { \flat }$ major at the end of the act. And I find it significant that $D _ { \flat }$ never again returns in the opera in such a memorable and important context. Before $D _ { \flat }$ can be reached at the end of the love duet, however, the immediate menace of C major must be put aside. This is the function of the interpolated C-major $\frac{4}{4}$ chord in the “bacio” theme. Recalling all of the C-major areas earlier in the act, this $\frac{4}{4}$ chord integrates the harmonic color of that key into the larger prolongation of the E-major cadential $\frac{4}{4}$ chord. At the same time, because of the way the C in the melodic line is left suspended, sufficient tension is maintained for the C to seek another resolution, a resolution up to $D _ { \flat }$.

At the end of Act I, then, the two keys associated with Otello’s character, E and $D _ { \flat }$, are powerful enough to absorb Iago’s C major. And the close juxtaposition of E major and $D _ { \flat }$ major harks back to Otello’s triumphant entrance in the opera, providing the link between the giant and the lover, the soldier and the man.