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## MASKED FACES. VERDI, UNCLE TOM, AND THE UNIFICATION OF ITALY

### Abstract:

Verdi's opera *Un ballo in maschera* was premiered shortly before the Unification of Italy, in February 1859. Originally, Verdi had intended to write an opera for the San Carlo in Naples about the assassination of the Swedish king Gustaf III in 1792. Instead, he produced a work for the Teatro Apollo in Rome about the assassination of a governor of Boston during the colonial period. Historians and musicologists keen to foster Verdi's patriotic credentials have tended to emphasise the role of the censors in distorting the composer's original intentions. Instead, this paper demonstrates that moving the plot from Sweden to America suited Verdi. Unlike some modern stage directors, Verdi and his publisher Ricordi never intended to set the plot back to Sweden. Throughout the Risorgimento Italy was looking across the Atlantic for constitutional models. Discussing America became a way of coming to terms with Italy's own experience of modernity. An American opera was therefore very much the order of the day. Moreover, unlike Europe America was perceived as a space without history, offering Verdi the opportunity to concentrate fully on the unfolding of the psychological drama between his opera's protagonists, without being constrained by historical events. Verdi's *Boston* presents audiences with a rather oppressing atmosphere. In this Verdi refers to other presentations of America on stage, which were popular in Italy at the time, in particular Giuseppe Rota's hugely successful ballet version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, premiered at La Scala just a few years earlier and now touring the peninsula. Rather than discussing America as a land of opportunities and a constitutional model for Italy, these works present life in the New World as barbarous and uncivilized, incompatible with Italy, which understood itself as *Kultur* nation. While challenging the idea that Italians discussed American experiences exclusively as blue-prints for its own future, the paper also contributes to debates which have questioned the traditional political readings of Verdi's operas.